

[Eileen Barker](#)

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Ageing in New Religions: The Varieties of Later Experiences¹

Eileen Barker

London School of Economics / Inform

E.Barker@LSE.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s and 1980s a wide variety of new religions became visible in the West, attracting young converts who often dropped out of college or gave up their careers to work long hours for the movements with little or no pay. Half a century or so later, those converts are now in their fifties or sixties, and approaching an age when, in the wider society, they would be considered of pensionable age; some are beginning to develop medical problems, and quite a few are anxious about what their future might hold. Few have paid into pension plans or for medical insurance.

This paper addresses some of the challenges that the new religious movements (NRMs) and their members are facing with this demographic shift from a movement consisting of enthusiastic young converts with few dependents to one in which there may be a substantial proportion of children and a growing number of ageing members able to offer only a limited contribution to the resources of the NRM as they find themselves increasingly dependent on others. A brief comparison with the arrangements of a few longer-established religions is included.

* * *

*Will you still need me,
Will you still feed me,
When I'm sixty-four?* [Paul McCartney, 1967]

Nothing stays young forever, and this applies to religions just as it does to young saplings that grow into sturdy and then gnarled oak trees – although some will die before they reach maturity. In each case, the process of ageing involves idiosyncratic features, yet there are certain patterns that repeat themselves with more or less frequency with

¹ I would like to thank the British Academy and the Religious Research Association's Constant J. Jacquet Research Award for the grants that enabled me to carry out some of the research in this paper. I would also like to thank the scores of members and former members of religions new and not so new who patiently answered my questions about their movements' provision (or lack of provision) for an ageing membership. All websites cited in the paper were accessed on 15 April 2012.

the passage of time. This paper examines both some of the variety and some of the recurrent trends that can be found as new religions and their members undergo the inevitable process of ageing.

New Religious Movements (NRMs)

Minority religions and spiritual groups have, variously, been labelled “cults”, “sects”, or “new religious movements” (NRMs). Each of these terms can serve its own purpose, selecting certain potential characteristics and discarding others. In the sociological literature, cults and sects have been distinguished from “church” and “denomination” according to such variables as the degree to which they are in tension with or accepted by the wider society, and the degree to which they are either exclusive or universal in their outlook (McGuire, 2002 ch.5; Stark and Bainbridge, 1987 p.328). In popular parlance, however, the terms cult and sect are commonly used to indicate that the speaker places a negative evaluation on the religion or group. For this reason, social scientists started to use the more neutral term “new religious movement” to cover the wide variety of non-traditional or alternative religions that came to public attention in the West around the 1970s. For practical purposes, some took “new” to refer to religions that had become visible since the Second World War (Barker, 1989 p.145); others have taken it to refer to the movements’ location at the fringe of the wider society (Melton, 2007 p.33), thus including not only nineteenth century religions, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons and Christadelphians, but also some religions that have newly become visible in the West, although they may have been in existence in other countries in one form or another for centuries or even millennia.

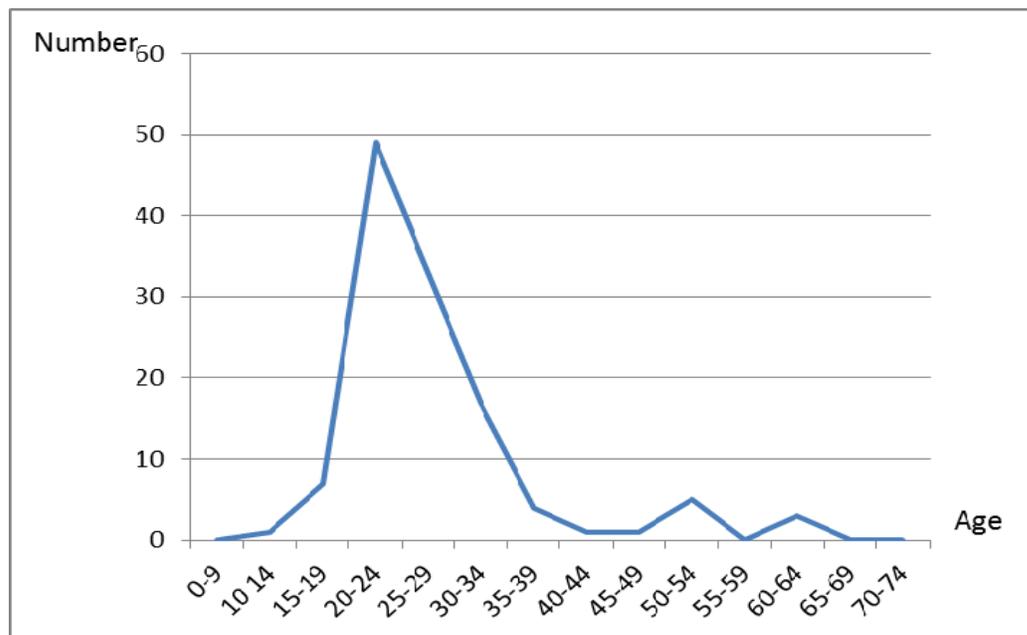
Both these approaches have their advantages and their disadvantages, but when the historian and Methodist minister J. Gordon Melton claimed that the new religions had more in common with the traditions from which they had emerged than they had with one another (Melton, 2004), it was possibly because my training was as a sociologist rather than as an historian or theologian that I found myself provoked into arguing for a different approach. I agree with Melton that it is important to understand the tradition from which NRMs have emerged; one can agree that many of the NRMs we are interested in studying exist in tension with the wider society; and one can certainly agree that there is an enormous variety in the beliefs and practices to be found amongst contemporary NRMs. But one can also believe that there are characteristics which new religions *are* likely to share in so far as they are in fact *new* in the sense of having a first-generation membership (Barker, 2004).

Following this debate with Melton, I have found it increasingly useful to define an NRM as a movement that has a membership consisting predominantly of converts. Starting from this defining characteristic as an independent variable, we can ask what further characteristics might follow – whenever and wherever the NRM happens to exist.² Furthermore, this approach allows us, perhaps paradoxically, to explore some of the likely consequences of new religions becoming less new, particularly, though not solely, as a demographic phenomenon.

² One could thus contend, although the contention will not be pursued here, that many of the characteristics that one can expect to find in a movement with a first-generation membership are likely to apply also to the early Christians, the early Muslims, the early Methodists and other NRMs throughout history and throughout the world.

NRMs as First-generation Movements

To begin with, it is important to stress that it can be foolhardy to generalise about NRMs. Demonstrably, they differ in the traditions from which they may have arisen, in their particular beliefs and practices and in their relations with the rest of society. That said, however, there are certain characteristics that one can at least look for in the movements. The first observation that might be made about a first-generation NRM is that converts tend to be more enthusiastic and active than those who were born into their religion. Secondly, the religion is likely to appeal to an atypical sample of the general population. In the past, new religions have frequently attracted the socially, economically or politically oppressed, offering them, perhaps, a millennial expectation and/or better conditions in this or the next life. However, and this is important for the present discussion, the wave of new religions that became visible in the West from around the late 1960s and early 1970s appealed to young adults from the middle classes. There were undoubtedly variations, with some movements appealing to a somewhat older constituency, particularly those that Bainbridge and Stark (1980) have called client cults, when the believer is expected to be earning enough money to pay for the movement's services. Generally speaking, however, most of the converts who went to live in a community and to work full-time for their movement tended to be disproportionately in their twenties. To take one of the most visible of these movements as an example, the average (mean) age of British and American Unificationists at conversion was fairly consistently around 23 in the 1970s (Barker, 1984 p.198-99; 206; 291),³ with the average age of the movement's membership in 1976 being 27 (see Figure 1).⁴



³ The Unification Church was founded by Sun Myung Moon (1920-) in Korea as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity in 1954. Missionaries were sent to Europe and North America in the late 1950s, but it was only after Moon had staged a number of rallies around the United States in the early 1970s that middle-class Western youth (later to be dubbed "Moonies") joined the movement in significant numbers.

⁴ Practically all the NRMs that mushroomed around the 1970s had a very high turn-over rate, especially in their early days (Barker, 1999; Bromley, 1988; Bird and Reimer, 1983). With older members leaving and younger converts joining, this meant that the average age did not increase by twelve months with the passing of each year.

Figure 1: Age of British Unificationists in 1976⁵

Thirdly, NRMs are usually led by a founder who, having been accorded a charismatic authority by his or her followers, is unlikely to be restrained by either rules or tradition, and tends, thus, to be both unpredictable and unaccountable to anyone except, perhaps, God. Fourthly, many NRMs, particularly those classified by Roy Wallis (1984) as world-rejecting movements, have relatively dichotomous worldviews that draw a sharp distinction between Godly and Satanic, good and bad – and, significantly, “them” and “us”, resulting in the members cutting themselves off, socially if not geographically, from the rest of society. Fifthly, it is not altogether surprising that, insofar as the movements are offering an alternative vision and way of life, tensions are likely to arise between the group and the rest of society, especially the families of converts and those with an interest in preserving the status quo.

Sixthly, and most pertinently for this paper, new religions change far more rapidly and radically than older, more established religions. Usually it is not long before a second generation is born into the movement and, although there are movements where this may not happen because of the practice of celibacy or birth control, it is inevitable that the charismatic founders will die and that the initial converts will age, leading to the demographic composition of the movement undergoing a marked transformation.⁶

The Varieties of Changing Demographic Profiles

To take one particularly striking example, in the early 1970s the average age of the membership of the Children of God (now known as The Family International) was twenty-three. There were no children and very few members whose age exceeded thirty. This meant that there were no dependents and the young converts, free from responsibilities, were able to travel round the world “litnessing” – that is, selling literature and witnessing to anyone who would listen to them. However, part of the belief system that was emphasised from the mid-1970s was what the movement’s founder, David Berg (1919-1994), referred to as “The Law of Love”, a doctrine that encouraged helping to meet the sexual needs of others. This involved not only “sharing” between members of the movement, but was also extended to embrace potential converts – a practice known as “flirty fishing”, which was to continue until 1987 (Chancellor, 2000; Lewis and Melton, 1994; Williams, 1998). As the movement discouraged the use of birth control, it was not long before a burgeoning second generation was to arrive and resources of time and money had to be diverted to raising these children.

By the late 1990s, whilst the average age had remained almost identical to what it had been two decades earlier, the demographic profile had been dramatically reversed. Rather than there being a large number of members in their early twenties, there were almost none of that age (Bainbridge, 2002 p. 23-26). Instead, there were two demographically separated generations with, on the one hand, a growing number of children and, on the other hand, a number of ageing converts who had remained in the movement and who, although they were still eager to bring others to Jesus, were no longer so successful getting new members to join as full-time missionaries. By 2010, the demographic structure had undergone a further significant shift, with the average age of

⁵ The small peak to the right of the graph represents some parents who joined after their sons (who were in their 20s) had joined the movement.

⁶ There are converts to some movements and some charismatic leaders who have claimed that they will not die (the Arizona-based Together Forever (Brown et al n.d. < <http://www.people-unlimited-inc.com/index.html> >) is a case in point). So far, however, these people’s lives have tended to end before they reach their century.

the initial converts having reached their mid- to late-fifties, and many of the second-generation adults taking on positions of responsibility in the organisation and running of the movement (see Figure 2).

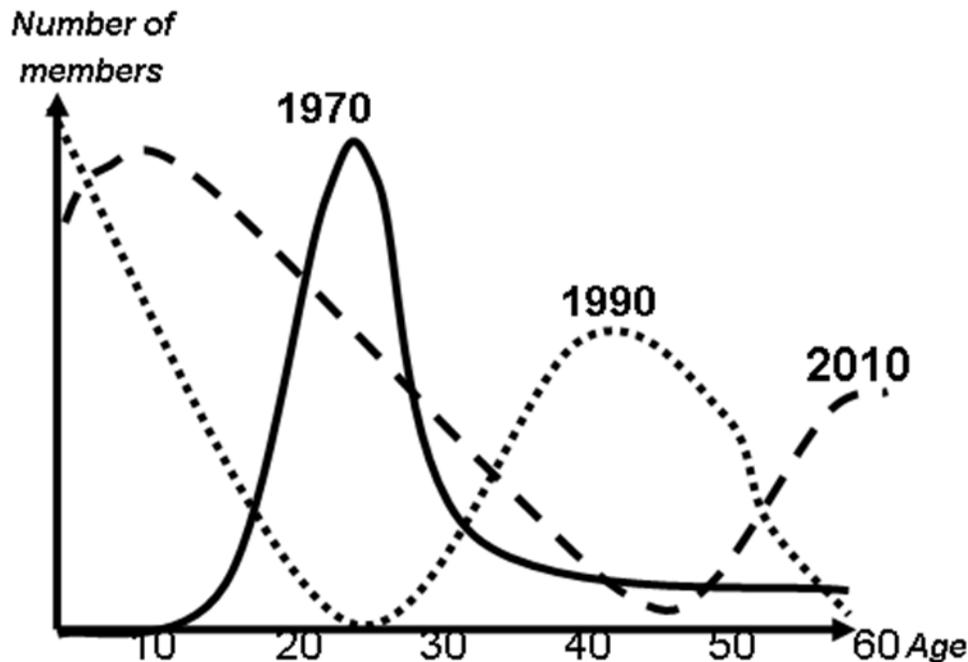


Figure 2: Changing age distribution of the Children of God / The Family International

A somewhat different pattern can be detected if one looks at the changing profile of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO, now known as Triratna), which was founded by Sangharakshita (born Dennis Lingwood 1925-) in the UK in the late 1960s, around the same time as the Unification Church was beginning to attract Western converts and the Children of God was starting up in California. The FWBO too had appealed to young enthusiasts with, by 1976, the average age of members being 29.7 for men and 35.1 for women. But the Order espoused an attitude towards sex that differed significantly from that of the Children of God. Although celibacy has not been a condition of membership, some of the more committed Order members have taken vows of celibacy and, allied to the belief that the most stable communities tend to be single sex, an overall culture has been one of separation between the sexes.

One result of this was that, by 2007, the average ages of male and female members were, respectively, 49.3 and 51.7.⁷ Figure 3 graphically illustrates how, during the period, the 20-somethings have all but disappeared, the 30-somethings are fast going, and the 50-somethings are rapidly becoming the norm. As Lokabandhu, the Order member who collected these statistics has pointed out, if present trends continue, the average age would be around 75 in thirty years' time.

⁷ These statistics are drawn from research undertaken in 2006 by the Triratna Chairs Assembly. The survey was answered by approximately 350 members (about a third of the total membership), a sample that reflected the profile of the whole Order in age, order age, gender, and residence.

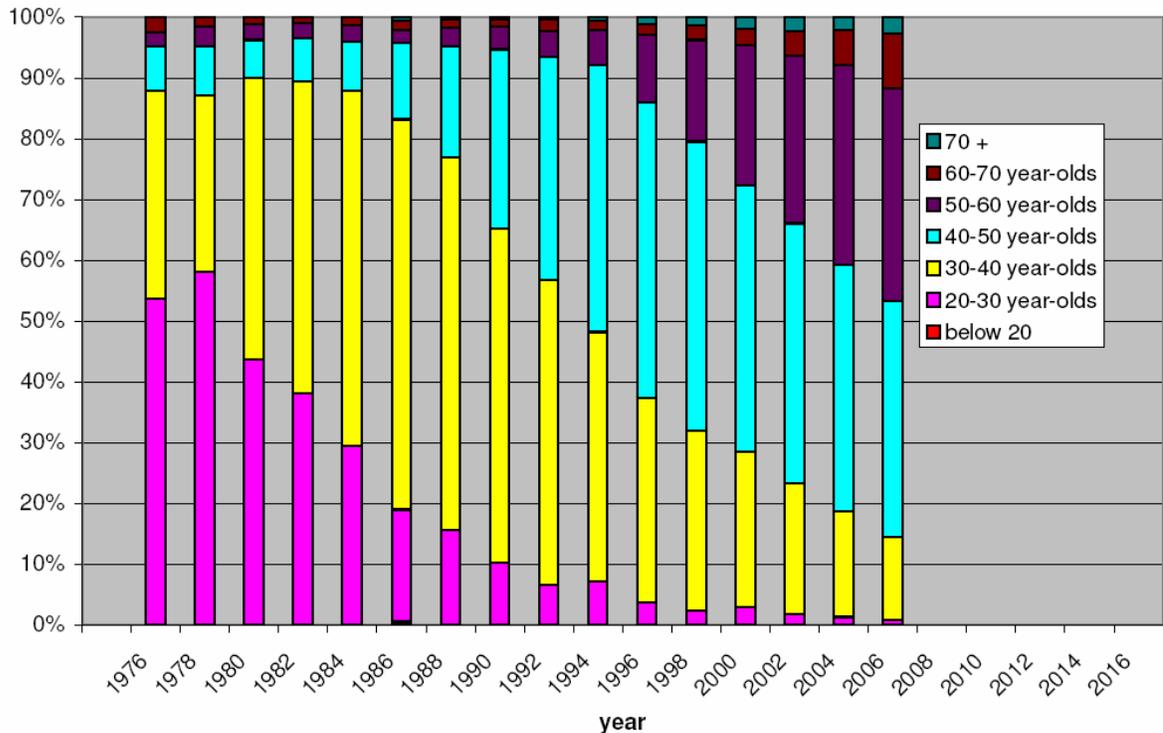


Figure 3: Age bands of the membership of the Western Buddhist Order by percentage between 1976 and 2007⁸

There are, logically, two ways in which an NRM can preserve a young profile over time. The first is through the birth of a second-generation membership. The second is through regularly recruiting new members. However, neither of these methods is sufficient to ensure the future of the movement. Several prolific NRMs have found that their children have a tendency to leave the movement as soon as they can. The first cohort of the second generation of both the Children of God and of the Unification Church have done just that (although in both cases the second cohort of the second generation has been more inclined to stay at least associated with their respective movements, following some fairly fundamental changes in the child-rearing practices and general culture of the movements).⁹

The second method, that of recruitment, can also have its limitations. Whilst charismatic leaders may initially attract youthful converts to their movement, the converts themselves have a tendency to attract people of their own age and, as they grow older, the incoming converts are likely to be older. As can be seen in Figure 4, the FWBO provides a striking example of this tendency. Whilst the movement has increased in absolute numbers over the past 40 years, the average age of ordination has increased from 25 for men and 34

⁸ Reprinted with permission from <http://freebuddhistudio.com/ftpusers/lokabandhu/Report%20-%20Order%20aging%20and%20care%20needs.pdf>

⁹ With the ageing of the membership and the eventual death of the founding leader, not only does the demographic profile of an NRM alter but the whole structure and culture of the movement can undergo far-reaching changes. One commonly noted process is that of “denominationalism”, when the movement accommodates to the society in a number of ways; the “them” vs. “us” boundary becomes increasingly permeable and the separateness and tensions become less pronounced. However, as Bryan Wilson (1967 p. 235) was at pains to point out, this is by no means an inevitable process.

for women in 1976 to 43 for men and 47 for women in 2006. The consequence of such a pattern continuing is that, although the movement might expect to grow for a few more years, it is at risk of reaching a peak and then dying out before the end of the century – just as the Shakers and many other initially successful new religions have died out in the past, including, more recently, the Panacea Society whose members were expecting eternal life on this earth (Shaw, 2011).

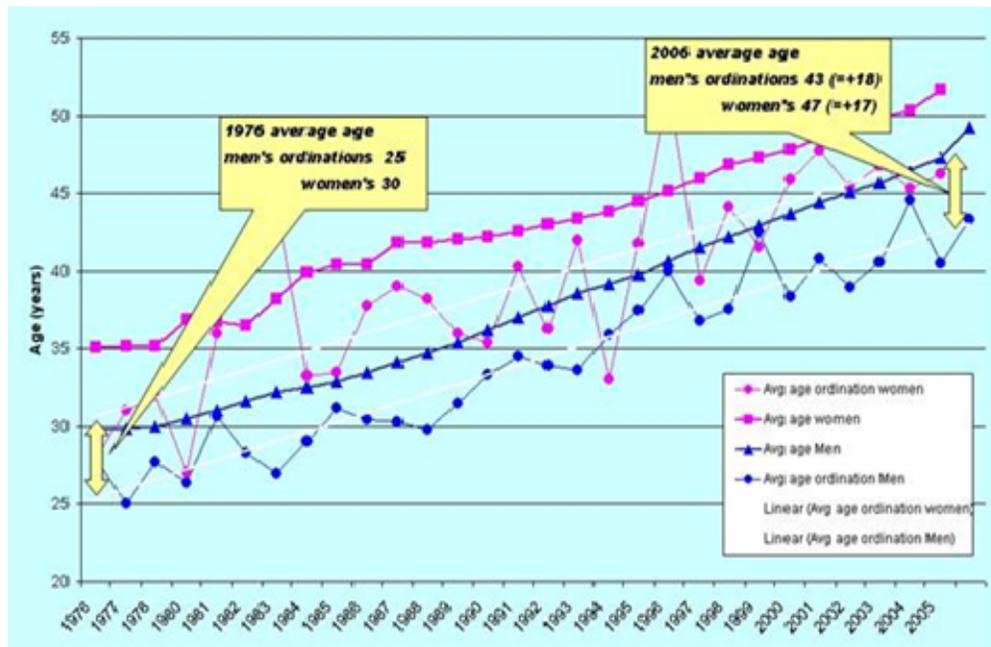


Figure 4: Average ages and ages at ordination of members of the FWBO 1976-2007)¹⁰

So, What's New?

Of course, improved living conditions and advances in medicine have resulted in increased life expectancies throughout the world, giving rise to societies with a growing number of elderly persons who are dependent on the working population (DWP, 2010; Harper, 2012). British politicians are not alone in expressing concern about the capacity of a welfare state to cope with the projected rise in numbers of centenarians (Coates, 2011 p.1, 9).¹¹ But while members of older, mainstream religions will be affected to a greater or lesser extent by such general shifts in population statistics,¹² it is unlikely, very generally speaking, that they will experience changes as dramatic as those that might be expected for converts to some of the contemporary NRMs half a century or so after their

¹⁰ This graph was sent to me in a personal communication from Lokabandhu, the member of the Order who conducted the Survey.

¹¹ It has been estimated that there are around 800,000 people suffering from dementia in the UK and, as we live longer, this number is expected to rise sharply in the near future, giving rise to what the Prime Minister has called a national crisis. Local councils, who are responsible for the care of the elderly, have described the situation as a ticking time bomb; and the British government has announced that it intends to more than double the amount of money to be spent on funding research into the disease so that it will reach £66 million by 2015 (BBC News, 26 March 2012).

¹² And, of course, it is not only changing birth rates and life expectancy due to diet, sanitary and medical conditions that result in societies facing new challenges; migration, wars and other man-made and natural disasters are among the other variables that can result in the rebalancing of the demographic profile of a society.

founding. One reason for this is that the older religions will have had longer to recognise the problem and to have worked out some sort of response. One might indeed venture to suggest that, other things being equal, the longer a religious movement has been in existence, the more likely it is to have faced the problem of an ageing membership and to have institutionalised arrangements to deal with a wider range of contingencies than those they envisaged having to face at the inception of the movement.

However, as has already been mentioned, it is impossible to generalise about NRMs. Some would appear to actively resist accepting any responsibility for meeting the needs of their elderly converts for as long as possible, while others anticipate such needs long before these have become a pressing problem. An example of the latter is the Buddhist Fo Guang Shan, which was founded by the Venerable Master Hsing Yun (1927-) in 1967. When I asked a middle-aged nun who was showing me around the movement's headquarters in southern Taiwan what would happen to her and the other nuns and monks when they were no longer able to work, she explained that they already provided free medical programmes and had built homes for both children and seniors. In fact, she told me, her mother (who was not a Buddhist nun) was currently living in the monastery's accommodation for the elderly and she was able to visit her daily. Other Buddhist NRMs in Taiwan, such the Tsu Chi Foundation established in 1966 by the Venerable Cheng Yen (1937-), are also noted not only for looking after their own elderly followers, but also for taking care of others in need (Schak and Hsiao, 2005).

Nonetheless, there are certain consequences of the kinds of beliefs and lifestyle followed by many of the NRMs that can exacerbate the ageing process. Not only is the health of the first-generation converts unlikely to be as robust as it was when they converted, they may find that they have neither medical insurance nor pension plan. Frequently the young converts dropped out of school to work full time for their movement, so they have no educational qualifications, and no recognised work experience to put on their curriculum vitae should they consider looking for "an outside job" in later life. Quite often they had cut off relations with their biological family, making it difficult to return or seek help from that quarter should they have wished to do so in the future.

Furthermore, because of their peripatetic lives, moving from one communal home to another, often in the far corners of the world, many first-generation converts have found that they have no official status; they have never owned or rented property in their own names; they have never possessed credit cards, and never claimed state benefits. Often they will discover they are not registered at all, or only in another country far away from where they are now living. So far as the state is concerned, they do not exist and have, therefore, no claim on statutory rights, even when these exist for fellow citizens. This state of affairs can become particularly acute in movements that believe they are living in the End Time.

Millennial expectations

Millennial expectations have been a common feature of new religious movements throughout history. Frequent disappointments have tended to lead either to the eventual abandonment of the belief or, more commonly, to a less imminent expectation of the fulfilment of the prophecy. It is rare for older religious movements to act as though they expected the world as we know it to change radically overnight in the immediate future, although they may still hold to the belief that this will happen sometime in the unforeseeable future. For the new religious movement, however, there can be a very real sense of immediacy and urgency. The believers may have a precise date in mind,

although it is more likely that they expect The Event to take place sometime within the next few months or years, but certainly within their lifetime. Such a belief can result in a further belief that there is no point in planning for the future. Indeed, to do so can be seen as a lack of faith.¹³

Such an approach was exemplified by the Children of God. From their earliest days, the members emulated the example of the first apostles, living in communities and sharing the “common pot”.¹⁴ They have rented houses rather than buying property and, instead of relying on a monetary income, they have “provisioned” goods such as food that has passed its “sell-by” date.¹⁵ With this kind of life style, combined with a firm belief that “God will provide”, it is not surprising that few, if any, of the converts were concerned with planning for their old age. They were, after all, expecting the imminent return of Jesus when, together with all those who had received Jesus as their Saviour, their mortal bodies would be changed with the Rapture as they rose to meet the Lord in the air.¹⁶ But although, following the turn of the century, members continue to notice signs that we are living in “the Last Days”, the certainty that theirs is the last generation to live in this world as we know it has gradually become questioned, and if one asks them when they expect Jesus to return, one might be told that it could be as likely to be within their grandchildren’s lifetime as within their own.

As the twenty-first century progressed, alongside growing doubts about the imminence of the End Time, there developed an awareness of the possibility that first-generation converts would become increasingly dependent on the movement for a number of needs that it might not be able to meet. Whilst the few elderly members who were currently aged 65 or over could be accommodated relatively easily in communal homes, a number of tensions were developing between the generations, especially as sufficient second-generation members reached a stage when they could out-number and outvote the first-generation on some domestic decisions.

This and a number of other developments led The Family International (TFI as the Children of God is now known) to undergo a series of radical changes in 2010, known within the movement as “the Reboot”. This included the directive that to be a full member it was no longer necessary to live in large communal homes, but that all members could instead live in smaller, more or less independent units – a change that was to cause anxiety for some long-term members who had assumed that they would spend the rest of their lives living communally.

Towards the end of 2010, partly in response to worries expressed by both first- and second-generation members, and partly because it was revealed that the Lord had instructed the leadership to “begin planning as if we have more time – even 30 to 50 more years”, TFI issued an internal document entitled *Care of Elderly Family Members* (Amsterdam, 2010). This recognised the need to address the problems that arose both

¹³ “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.” Matthew 6:34.

¹⁴ “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” Acts 2: 44, 45.

¹⁵ Provisioning is the term used by the movement when members obtain a variety of commodities that can include restaurant meals, electrical goods, furniture, bed linen and even, on occasion, medical treatment, by explaining to potential donors that they are Christian missionaries.

¹⁶ A brief account of their belief in The Time of the End, together with Biblical quotations, can be found at The Family International’s website at <http://www.thefamilyinternational.org/en/about/our-beliefs/jesus-second-coming/time-end>

from the fact that the first generation might get much older than they had expected to in their lives on earth and that, because of the changes brought about by the Reboot, elderly members would not necessarily be able to rely on the safety net of a communal home.

Extrapolating from the statistics, it had become clear, as indicated in Figure 5, that the financial implications of the ageing converts could be prohibitive. Within ten years the cost of providing a modest pension of \$300 a month to members over 65 would be more than three million US dollars per annum, and five years later, in 2025, it would be more than six million.

Age in 2010	No. in 2010	2010	2015	2020	2025
51-55	788				788
56-60	680			680	680
61-65	188		118	118	188
66-70	18	18	18	18	18
71 +	18	18	18	18	18
Total aged 65+		36	224	904	1,692
Annual Cost @ \$300 pm		\$129,600	\$806,400	\$3.25m.	\$6.09m.

Figure 5: The Family International: Cost of providing pensions to members over 65 years of Age¹⁷

With the realisation that TFI had over 1000 members who had been born before 1954 and had not had the time to adjust to their ageing needs, the leadership has, albeit rather late in the day, begun to devote some serious thought to planning for the future. It (the leadership) has declared itself committed to helping those in desperate need of assistance from the small fund that it had accumulated over the past few years for emergencies, but has also recognised that this could not even begin to meet the needs of those who would be reaching an age of dependency in the near future. It decided,

¹⁷ This table was constructed from statistics contained in Amsterdam (2010). It assumes that none of the members have died in the later periods, but even if all those over 65 in 2010 had died by 2025, the cost would still be almost \$6 million p.a. A more recent communication (Amsterdam 2012) provides the following statistics: 18-19 (which includes around 50 people who are 16 and 17 years old, since 16 is the minimum age for opening a TFI member account); 20-29: 860; 30-39:734; 40-49: 459; 50-59: 1,256; 60 and older: 574.

therefore, to inaugurate an “Elderly Care Investment Board” responsible for researching into the best ways in which to invest and disperse whatever funds were available. At the same time, it set up an “Elderly Care Desk” to look into the possibilities of obtaining pensions and medical benefits in different countries. To this end, it asked the entire membership to share ideas and offer to take on any projects that might help alleviate the situation in the future. It also suggested that individual members might consider living in countries where they could have access to good medical care and other benefits and/or explore the possibility of purchasing health insurance. Looking further ahead, younger converts and second-generation members are now encouraged to develop personal plans for their future (Amsterdam, 2011).

The Varieties of Ageing Experience

Whilst TFI had not built up reserves of wealth over the years, this is by no means always the norm. There are NRMs that have accumulated enormous wealth, but this may be held in the hands of a small, elite leadership, whilst the rank-and-file membership which had worked so hard to acquire the fortune may be left destitute. ‘Rose’ was a young midwife when she met and joined one such NRM in the mid-1960s. She travelled around the world and spent some time as a regional leader in Latin America. Now over 80, and having devoted over 50 years of her life to working for the movement, she struggles to find enough money to buy food and pay for her rented accommodation in South London. Her only steady income is a state pension, which is pegged at the absolute minimum as she has not lived in the country long enough to be eligible for anything else. She does, however, receive small sums of money from some former members (and even the occasional member) who feel concerned about her. But, although she still contributes to its work, she receives no financial support from the movement itself. When asked about her situation, Rose smiles somewhat ruefully and replies that she is just dependent on God.

Two points should be made: first, although the case of the woman I am calling Rose is based on a real person in a particular NRM, similar stories could be told about people in a number of other NRMs; and, secondly, not all the first-generation converts to Rose's movement find themselves in such a parlous state. A few have inherited wealth which they have not handed over to the movement, others have been working for themselves or in businesses unconnected with the movement, and those working for the movement in positions of responsibility may now be earning at least a minimal salary out of which they are able to contribute to a small pension for the future, but as this has not been the practice for long, older members have not had the chance to invest sufficient pension contributions to give themselves a living income on retirement.¹⁸

But there are exceptions. If an NRM expanded its business endeavours to the degree that it has been employing outsiders, it is likely that these non-members will receive at least the statutory minimum wage, pension plans and perhaps medical insurance, and this can provide an impetus for ensuring that members working alongside the non-members might also receive such benefits. This has the case with some of the Unification-related businesses, such as *The Washington Times*, which has now been paying members commensurate wages for sufficient time to enable them to have acquired viable pensions for their retirement.

¹⁸ Second-generation members who are working for their movement are now far more likely than their parents to receive relatively reasonable salaries with concomitant insurance and pension plans.

A somewhat different situation arises with members of a Pagan group who have lived independently and worked in the wider community, only meeting fellow practitioners for ritual occasions. As they age, however, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to contact other Pagans although they may feel an ever-increasing need of the company of like-minded people. For this reason, there are Pagans who are now beginning to explore the possibility of establishing homes for the aged, where they can live out their last days. There are Pagan websites encouraging Pagans to visit the elderly in hospital and hospices,¹⁹ and one can also find advertisements inviting fellow Pagans to “Adopt an Elder”,²⁰ but to date the needs of elderly Pagans are only just beginning to be voiced. Like the Pagan Federation, the Druid Network, which links groups around the world, though primarily in Europe and North America, does not supply any organised provision for the elderly, but has supported members applying (often unsuccessfully) to be volunteer chaplains in hospitals, and it does encourage members to become involved with their local communities, including offering assistance to the sick and elderly.

As mentioned earlier, Triratna (formerly the FWBO) has carried out a fairly extensive investigation into the ageing of the Order. One of the consequences of this has been the founding of the Abhayaratna Trust, with the aim of (a) benefiting members of the Order who experience poverty and hardship, especially in old age; (b) fundraising to help in the setting-up of new projects such as sheltered housing, hospices or woodland burial sites; and (c) enabling the members’ sense of gratitude and appreciation for one another to take practical shape.²¹

Starting from the late 1990s, a similar awareness of impending problems can be found among some members of Shambhala, an NRM which, having been founded initially in the late 1960s by the Tibetan meditation master and Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), now describes itself as an international community of Buddhist meditation centres. A survey conducted by the movement in 1998 indicated that 20 per cent of Shambhalians were already over the age of 60 and another 50 per cent were between the ages of 45 and 60. It was also found that a significant proportion of those ageing Shambhalians were relatively poor, sometimes because as young converts they had put their time and energy into developing Shambhala (known in those days as Vajradhatu) rather than pursuing careers or business opportunities.

A further point that was made was that existing care facilities such as nursing homes for old people who need significant levels of care were unlikely to operate on Shambhala principles and were not, therefore, particularly conducive to a contemplative old age. Moreover, it was unclear to what extent Shambhala centres would be physically accessible to elderly practitioners who were suffering from physical and/or mental limitations (Whitehorn, 2009). A working group was set up in 1998, which launched a page on the Shambhala website, initiating an e-mail discussion forum to encourage and cultivate a sharing of experience and wisdom about ageing, and, at the time of writing (2012), the movement’s Cohousing blog was advertising a 5-day workshop entitled “Making it Happen” in “Senior Cohousing Facilitation / Development”.²²

¹⁹ <http://www.paganfed.org/comsrv-hosp.shtml>

²⁰ <http://www.neopagan.net/Adopt-an-Elder.html>

²¹ <http://www.abhayaratnatrust.org.uk/>

²² <http://www.cohousingblog.com/2012/02/22/making-it-happen-senior-cohousing-facilitation-workshop/>

Another initiative is to be found in the Rajneeshee movement, which was founded around the 1960s when Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931-1990) gathered around him a number of disciples or sannyasins in India. In 1981 Bhagwan moved to the United States where the controversial 65,000-acre 'Big Muddy Ranch' was established near Antelope in the state of Oregon. This was, however, disbanded following a number of criminal activities perpetrated by some of the sannyasins, and Osho (as Bhagwan had become known) returned to India in 1987, dying a few years later (Carter 1990; Fitzgerald 1986; Fox 2000).

Today the movement consists of a number of more or less autonomous groups around the world who meet together to read Osho's writings, meditate and carry out various other practices. In 2010, one of the sannyasins wrote a letter, suggesting that a hostel, "The Last Resort" might be established where she and others "could be cared for in our last days by fellow sannyasins – supported in our conscious preparation and journey and knowing that, at our body-leaving, we will be farewelled with love and joy, with music and dance." (Maneesha, 2010). The following year, a meeting was held in Devon, England at which there was apparently overwhelming support for the idea, and it was agreed to commission a feasibility study.²³

Other Western NRMs that have gone a bit beyond good intentions and tentative planning in providing for the elderly. The Farm, founded by Stephen Gaskin (1935-) and some of his followers in 1971, is an intentional community in Tennessee that emerged out of the Californian hippie culture of the 1960s. As early as 1991, Gaskin had laid out the plans for "an ecotopian retirement and health care centre" on 100 acres of land adjacent to The Farm, known as the Rocinante Health Center (Gaskin, 1991; Miller, 2012 p.21; Neville, 2007). Residents, who can participate fully in the life of The Farm, are expected to build their own cabin/house (or have it built), and they have to handle their own living expenses and pay dues to Rocinante of \$100 per month. Reportedly there were seven residents by 2008.²⁴

Many, if not most, NRMs have two or more layers of membership, with an inner core of those who have dedicated their lives to working for, and sometimes living communally in, their movement; and then there are outer layers of believers who live and work in the wider society, coming into contact with the movement with more or less dedication and frequency for lectures, courses and/or rituals of one kind or another. This is not unlike the distinction between the clergy and congregations of many older religious movements. One such NRM is the Brahma Kumaris, which was founded in India in the late 1930s by Lekhraj Khubchand Kirpalani (1877-1969), and which is still run by some of the early converts, who are, naturally enough, quite elderly by now. Here the inner core consists primarily of celibate women who live in communal homes and are supported by donations from the other members or "students", most of whom have worked in the wider society and/or have independent incomes. The care that elderly BKs can expect to receive from their community depends to a considerable extent on how much they contributed to the movement during their active life. Some will pass their final days in the movement's hospital in India.

There are, however, occasions when offers of help for the sick and/or elderly can have consequences disapproved of by the wider society, particularly if the group believes in alternative, complementary or ayurvedic healing rather than western or allopathic

²³ <http://www.oshonews.com/2011/04/the-last-resort-meditative-hospice/>

²⁴ <http://directory.ic.org/21689/Rocinante>

medicine. The ill-fated Horus community, founded in 1989 in southern France by Marie-Thérèse Castano (1945-), provides one such example. Three of its members, including Mme Castano, were convicted of the illegal practice of medicine after it was judged that two sisters who had died should have been hospitalised. One long-term member of Horus reportedly commented that the sisters had chosen to come to the community to die as

They would rather be in Nature, surrounded by beautiful trees, close to their old friends than in a hospital, all alone in a bed, stuck full of tubes (Palmer, 2011 p.130-140).

Some Older Varieties of Ageing Experience

As suggested earlier, older religions are more likely to have come to terms with the challenges of caring for their elderly members. To the degree that the religion has continued to cut itself off from the rest of society, the elderly might expect close family and/or the local congregation to be relied upon to meet their needs as they grow old. The “Exclusive Brethren”, having been founded by John Nelson Darby (1800-1881) in the first half of the nineteenth century, hardly continues to qualify as an NRM, most of its members having been born into several generations of the movement. Sociologists would be more likely to refer to it as a 19th-century sect which, as the name suggests, has separated itself from mainstream Christianity and preserved its distance from the rest of society as far as possible (Wilson, 1967). In other words, it is one of those erstwhile NRMs that have resisted pressures to “denominationalise”, retaining several (though not all) of the characteristics associated with first-generation movements, including a sharply dichotomous worldview that clearly distinguishes not only between Godly and Satanic and right and wrong, but also between “us” and “them”. For those within the group, this has promoted a strong sense of family and reliance on fellow believers. As the members grow old, they are likely to move somewhere near their children or close relatives, often living in “Granny homes” built by their children as extensions or in the garden of their own houses. For those who have no immediate family, the local congregation will arrange a rota to provide the elderly with meals and to take them to and from worship services. Brethren have told me that even former members may be materially looked after by members from whom they are “cut-off” and with whom they cannot eat or possibly even speak apart from very basic communication.

The Amish Church began in Switzerland in the late seventeenth century as an Anabaptist schism, led by Jakob Ammann (c.1656–c.1730). In the early eighteenth century, many of the Amish migrated to America where, traditionally, they live within rural communities in their own family homes, which are likely to have a *Dawdi Haus* or *Grossdaadi Haus* (“grandfather house”) for the grandparents, who are able to maintain their own personal customs and living arrangements in an unchanging social structure in a way that would not be possible in an institution for old people. There is little problem with loneliness or feeling no longer part of the community. Economic subsistence is maintained without government aid of any kind but with, if necessary, either relatives or the church paying medical bills (Hostetler, 1993 p.167-170).

Slightly earlier, in mid-seventeenth century England, George Fox (1624–1691), James Naylor (1616–1660) and others gave rise to the Religious Society of Friends, more commonly known as Quakers. For several decades, the movement was radically disruptive and in severe tension with society, suffering brutal violence and persecution. But, unlike the Amish, who have consciously maintained a significant degree of separation from mainstream culture, the Quakers have come to tolerate the world and the world has generally come to tolerate them, with most members today both living and

working in the wider society (Isichei, 1967; Pink Dandelion et al, 2010).²⁵ The Society has, nonetheless, established several homes for elderly Friends in England and other parts of the world. Hartrigg Oaks, a retirement village with over 150 bungalow spread out over a 21-acre site on the outskirts of York, is run by the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust.²⁶ Residents (who are not confined to Quakers) are encouraged to plan to move into the village while they are still relatively young and active, but there is a dedicated Community Care Team that can look after people in their own homes when necessary, and a care centre exists for those who reach a stage when they need more intensive attention.²⁷

But not all the older religions have prepared their members for old age – even amongst some of the more mainstream religions it is possible to find that those who have devoted their lives to the service of their God are ill-prepared for their retirement. In an Associated Press article, instances are cited of Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian clergy “facing a retirement security crisis” as they find themselves with a pension of around \$300 a month, facing unaffordable medical and heating bills and often having trouble in putting food on the table (Carpenter, 2010). One minister recalls having been told by his Bishop at the time of ordination that he would always have a great retirement plan – eternal life after he died. However, the pervasive attitude that “God will take care of it” does not always seem so convincing for the period immediately before death.

Who is responsible for the elderly?

Questions about who is responsible for ageing members can give rise to a wide range of answers. The answers may differ not only with different individuals and different movements, but also according to the different societies in which the members find themselves. Some consider that it is up to the state (local or national government) to provide. Others believe that responsibility lies with the religious organisation (at a local, national or international level) to the extent that their members have dedicated their lives to its service and it is not uncommon for claims to be made by former members who say that they devoted a substantial part of their working lives to their erstwhile movement and that it now owes them some sort of recompense. Yet others are of the opinion that the responsibility lies with the individuals themselves or with their biological families. There are several instances of those who, having been born into a movement, rejected it on reaching adulthood, but do not feel they can reject their parents who are “still in”. There are also those who were born into and have stayed in their movement but now feel they have to support their parents (or, occasionally, grandparents) who have since left, but did so too late to be able to prepare for their old age. And there are, of course, some first-generation converts who never had children for one reason or another – possibly because the movement has advocated celibacy, contraception, sterilisation and/or abortion, as has been the case in the Rajneeshee movement, Synanon and Scientology’s Sea Org.

Resorting to the Law

There are members and, more frequently, former members of NRMs who have turned to the law in an attempt to claim back some of the money or property that they had handed over on joining, or in an attempt to receive some sort of compensation for the years of

²⁵ It might be noted, however, that both the Amish and the Quakers were among the 180 religions included in the “list” featured in the Belgian government’s Report on Sects (Duquesne and Willems, 1997).

²⁶ Rowntree, like Cadbury, Fry and many others, was among those philanthropists sometimes referred to as the “Quaker capitalists”.

²⁷ <http://www.jrht.org.uk/node/128>

labour that they had contributed to their movement. Several former members of the Church of Scientology have engaged in such actions, claiming back pay and/or challenging the billion-year contract that they signed when they started working for the Church. In 2010, a U.S. District Judge ruled in favour of Scientology in such a case, in which a couple was reported to be claiming over £1million back pay (Gardner, 2010). However, the court affirmed that the plaintiff had been working as the staff member of a religion,²⁸ and

The interplay between the First Amendment's Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses creates an exception to an otherwise fully applicable statute if the statute would interfere with a religious organization's employment decisions regarding its ministers.²⁹

Thus the court ruled that, even if the Plaintiff could have convinced the court that federal and state labour violations had taken place, the "ministerial exception" would apply, just as it does to Catholic Orders when monks and nuns do not need to be paid because they have taken a vow of poverty.

There have been a few cases in Europe and North America (examples are to be found amongst a small number of former Scientologists and Unificationists) when a settlement has been reached, but these are relatively rare and have tended to include a 'gagging order', forbidding the plaintiffs to speak about their experiences in the movement. The situation is, however, somewhat different in Japan, where there is a group of lawyers who are actively engaged in taking on the Unification Church and a few other minority religions such as Aum Shinrikyo, Home of Heart and Shinji Shumeikai, with the result that there have been several successful and lucrative lawsuits brought by former members claiming compensation for their 'lost youth' (Uotani 2011).

Some of the ill-fated Davidians (many of whom later, in 1993 as the Branch Davidians led by David Koresh, were to be burned to death in Waco following a siege by the FBI) had paid a double tithe to create a fund to provide for their care in retirement, and they sought refunds when the then leader, Florence Houteff, decided to dissolve the organisation by turning to the courts, but the funds were dissipated by court costs and lawyers' fees (Pitts, 2009 p.57-8). On the rare occasions when former members have banded together to bring about a class action against a movement, this has been unlikely to succeed.³⁰

There are several reasons why the law holds out little hope of redress for ageing converts. Few elderly rank and file members have the know-how to start legal proceedings, and/or they are very unlikely to have sufficient money to pay for lawyers, unless they can find one who is prepared to take their case *pro bono*.³¹ In some

²⁸ After lengthy court battles, the Church of Scientology had been recognized as a religion in October 1993 by the U.S. Inland Revenue Service.

²⁹ Claire Headley v. Church of Scientology International, et al. United States District Court Central District of California, Case no: CV 09-3987 DSF (FFMx) 4 February 2010.

³⁰ One successful class action was brought not by ageing converts, but by young adults who had been abused as children while being brought up in ISKCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness). The class action was, however, conducted with the full co-operation of devotees who were determined to "clean up" the movement and to make sure that such abuses would not recur in the future (Rochford, 2007).

³¹ The late Herbert Rosedale Esq., who was President of the American Family Foundation (now the International Cultic Studies Association) from 1988 until his death in 2004, offered free advice and representation in numerous cases where he believed that NRMs had victimised their members, former members or members of the public.

instances, such as that of TFI, there would be little point in going to court as, even if the plaintiff were to win his or her case, the movement has little or no money with which it could pay compensation or even costs. On the other hand, those movements that have amassed large fortunes will have the wherewithal to retain top lawyers to fight their cause and/or may have stashed their wealth in inaccessible locations or handed over the capital to trusted relatives or followers.

The Varieties of Theological Positions and Spiritual Needs

Apart from the financial needs and physical protections that are required to cater for the elderly, important factors that can affect ageing believers (and the ways they are treated) are those attitudes towards death and towards the older generation that are fostered by a movement's belief system. Christian-based NRMs, if they are not expecting to enjoy the New Jerusalem or Kingdom of Heaven on earth, are likely to be looking forward to their next life in heaven – or fearing eternal damnation. Some Islamic NRMs promise true believers, especially those who are prepared to forego their old age to die as martyrs, that Paradise awaits them. Some New Age and Pagan religions are, like Eastern religions, more likely to believe in some kind of reincarnation, when individuals will return to this world in a condition that is likely to reflect in some way their activities in their present lives. And then, as mentioned earlier, there are those who believe that their movement has discovered the secret of eternal life on this earth. For some, this might, in principle at least, be the source of great happiness as one approaches, reaches and passes one's three-score years and ten. For others, however, it can give rise to a growing anxiety.³²

One of the most prominent tenets of Amish preaching is "Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Exod. 20:12; Eph 6:2; Col. 3:20), and their communities have been described as gerontocracies (Hostetler, 1980 p.167). Pagans see old age and dying as part of life's natural cycle – women pass through the stages of maid, mother and crone, each of which plays an important role in the community. Generally speaking, however, it would seem that Eastern religions and cultures are more likely to honour, respect and take care of their elderly than those to be found in the "developed" West. The founder of Fo Guan Shan, the Buddhist monastery mentioned earlier, quotes a Chinese saying "To have an elderly person in your home is like possessing a precious jewel" (Yun Hsing, 2011 p.41). The Chinese, Vietnamese and other Asiatic people have a strong tradition of ancestor worship and treat their departed forebears as though they still have needs similar to those they had in this life.³³

In 1998 a Krishna devotee who has strongly advocated the establishment of hospices that would provide professional holistic care for the body, mind and spirit of terminally ill members of ISKCON wrote:

For a devotee to leave his or her body in the company of other Vaishnava devotees is considered the mercy of the Lord, and to depart from the body at a place of pilgrimage is the fulfilment of life on earth. As yet, death, dying and bereavement amongst devotees around the world have not reached proportions where ISKCON has had to provide facilities common to the Society at large. (Dom, 1998)

³² See the chapter "Death, After All" in Shaw (2011 p. 317-328).

³³ It is not uncommon in a number of cultures and NRMs for people to claim that they have contact with the dead and there is even some research that suggests that belief in post-death contact may be associated with health and well-being in late life (Krause and Bastida, 2009).

There is now extensive ISKCON literature published on hospice and palliative care, and in India there is some hospice care for devotees.³⁴ Elsewhere, however, despite the movement's good intentions, most devotees remain reliant on state and private healthcare.

The Varieties of Futures for Ageing NRMs

Only the foolhardy would risk prophesising the future of any social movement and, when examining NRMs, almost the only generalisation that it would be safe to make is that one cannot generalise. That said, however, there are several questions that sociologists of religion might wish to ask and a number of tendencies that they might observe.

Perhaps the first question to be asked is whether a particular NRM will survive. Rodney Stark (1996 p.113) has suggested that "probably no more than one religious movement out of 1,000 will attract more than 100,000 followers and last for as long as a century". There are a number of reasons why movements might not be expected to be successful, not least of which is the level of tension they experience with mainstream society (Stark, 1987 p.13). One that concerns us here is, however, the extent to which they are able to replace their membership with new converts and/or subsequent generations. As we have seen, the FWBO/Tiratna is one NRM that has looked as though it was in danger of 'ageing itself out of existence'. However, having recognised the problem, the movement is now taking a number of steps to rectify the situation by encouraging the younger members to play a more prominent role in the movement

If, however, the movement does manage to keep or increase a viable membership, it is quite likely (though by no means inevitable) that it will have, to some extent at least, denominationalized and that the sharply dichotomous boundaries between "us" and "them" will have become more relaxed. The Family International and the Unification Church illustrate such a process in the accommodating changes they introduced between the rearing of the first and the second cohorts of their second-generation members. Furthermore, those second-generation members who work for their movements are far more likely to have negotiated a living wage, with both the movement and themselves making contributions for a future pension and medical insurance.³⁵

It is also likely that the certainty with which some beliefs have been held will begin to dissipate with the passage of time. This is especially likely when millennial expectations are disappointed, with a dawning realisation that perhaps there is more of a "morrow" than had been anticipated and that preparations might need to be made for, among other things, an ageing membership. Even non-millennial movements with a predominantly first-generation membership are unlikely to have anticipated the needs of an ageing membership until those needs become pressing; and when they do, the movements will respond in a number of different ways, ranging from belated attempts to institutionalise arrangements for care to studied avoidance of any responsibility.

³⁴ The Bhaktivedanta Hospital in Mumbai offers holistic care, including a fully functional spiritual care department, catering for all believers and none; there is the Vrndavan hospice in Vrndavan; and a Mayapur hospice near Calcutta is in the planning stage.

³⁵ One of the factors that could account for the second-generation's ability to "unionise" might be that they are likely to have grown up enjoying horizontal relationships, whereas their parents were more likely to have been controlled by vertical communication and authority structures which frequently interfered with serious interactions between peers (Barker, 2005).

One development that can be noticed in several NRMs that started as communal movements around the 1970s, but are no longer so, is that, independently of any instructions from above, individual households tend to cluster in certain geographical areas, where, independently of the movement's hierarchy, they can meet and support each other both physically and, perhaps more importantly, spiritually. Possibly even more interesting is the fact that former members and their households tend to cluster too.

This "self-help" tendency has undoubtedly been facilitated by the growth of the Internet; virtual social networking through email and, increasingly, Facebook, has enabled both members and former members to offer each other suggestions and support of both a practical and a spiritual nature. Indeed, the enormous potential of these new media to communicate and mobilise at the horizontal level has already radically transformed nearly all the NRMs that started in the West around the 1970s, and there can be little doubt that future developments will affect them at all levels in the years to come (Barker, 2005; Campbell, 2006; Cowan, 2007; Dawson, 2001).

Concluding comments

Starting from the definition of a new religious movement as one that has a first-generation membership, it has been proposed that such movements are likely to share certain characteristics, including an atypical representation of the population as a whole, although exactly how the membership profile differs from the general population will vary from movement to movement, from place to place and from time to time (Lewis and Bauman, 2012 p.196). It was, however, suggested that many of those NRMs which became visible in the West around the 1970s appealed disproportionately to young adults. These young converts may have donated whatever personal assets they had to their movement and, particularly those who joined the so-called "world rejecting religions", often gave up their education or careers to live and work full-time with their movement for little or no pay – and with little or no thought for the morrow.

Inevitably, these young converts have aged with the passage of time, and were reaching late middle age by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. They may have worked for years without paying into any pension schemes; and they may not have any insurance policy for medical care or other contingencies. Some are beginning to develop medical problems, and quite a few are starting to be anxious about what the future might hold for them. In some cases they may be unsure about where they can live; they may be experiencing the psychological anxieties of facing death by themselves or in spiritual loneliness, cut off from people with whom they share a common set of beliefs and values. A few may be experiencing feelings of abandonment by the movement to which they had devoted their lives and/or disappointment at the ways in which the theological beliefs they espoused in their youth seem not to have resulted in the outcomes about which they had held such high expectations.

On the other hand, there are members of NRMs who can look forward to an old age in which they are cared for with their psychological and spiritual needs being met by fellow believers in a safe and comfortable physical and social environment.

It has in this paper been possible to draw on only a limited number of the hundreds of NRMs that emerged in the West in the second half of the twentieth century.³⁶ Yet, as even these few examples have illustrated, the precise trajectory of the demographic profile of the membership of an NRM will vary according to a number of variables. Nonetheless, one common feature is that converts will age and the movement is almost bound to have a growing number of ageing members who will find themselves increasingly dependent on others whilst they themselves are able to offer only a diminishing contribution to the general weal.

When I started researching for this paper I asked a number of NRMs questions about the arrangements that were being made to prepare for their ageing membership. It soon became obvious that there was a surprisingly widespread lack of awareness that there might be a problem. Some pointed to the fact that the movement already had a few elderly members who were happily looked after in their own or community housing, but my informants did not seem to have recognised that accommodating a tiny minority of dependents (most of whom had probably been in positions of leadership) was by no means the same as accommodating a large minority or even majority of dependents. The implications of the changing demographic profile simply had not struck home. However, even the limited number of questions that I was asking did, to some extent, result in a "consciousness raising" and it was not difficult to convince some of these middle-aged first-generation converts that there could be problems ahead. It was also clear that, despite their relative youth and the fact that they had been born into their movements with comparatively little experience of the wider society, many of the second-generation had a greater awareness of the fact that they would be called upon to support the elderly and that it might be an idea for them to "take heed for the morrow".

This paper has tried to highlight not only the challenge of changing demographics that an NRM is likely to face, but also some of the many varieties of factors that could determine the manner in which that challenge is faced. These include the social, political, economic and cultural environment to be found within both the movements and the wider societies in which they find themselves. Much more work needs to be done on this subject, which provides a challenge not only for the NRMs themselves, but also for the social scientists who study them.

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³⁶ INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements www.inform.ac), a charity based at the London School of Economics which collects data on minority religions, has some information on well over a thousand such movements currently active in the U.K. alone.

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