

Book Review: Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements edited by Eileen Barker



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What links The Church of Scientology, the Family International, and the Québécois group La Mission de l'Esprit-Saint? All are New Religious Movements which have undergone significant changes over the last few decades. Afe Adogame finds that this book is a must-read for scholars of NRMs, historians of religion, social scientists, and policy makers.



Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements. Eileen Barker (ed.). Ashgate. 2013.

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New religious movements (NRMs) – and in actual fact any religious phenomena – is hardly static and unchanging, but dynamic and constantly in flux. Religion is not a museum piece nor a tourist-trod monument, but a vibrant force in people's lived experiences and expressions.

This collection of 17 essays considers the different ways in which certain practices in NRMs change or become neglected as the movements themselves develop or fade away. The essays demonstrate the ways in which 'religious realities are actually constructed and reconstructed' (p. 260), and reflect a diversity of approaches, each providing a critical, scholarly perspective. Contributors include academics writing with a multidisciplinary focus, as well as current and ex-members of NRMs, and advocates of 'cult awareness'. This selection of contributors is a real strength of the collection. By exploring NRMs beyond their foundational histories, with a special focus on dynamics of change, resilience and transformation of beliefs and rituals, and schisms and diversification, the contributors catapult the study of NRMs to a new level of discourse.

Before considering some of the collection's essays, some background on NRMs may be useful for readers. The horizontal-vertical growth of NRMs is better grasped when considered within the locus of religious interaction, competition, and influence within societies. Under such conditions, certain beliefs, practices, and codes of conduct become discarded outright, altered, preserved, and transformed, but they also adjust to the local-global context. The change also leads to the revivification and revitalization of aspects of new religious cultures.

It is very difficult to give accurate membership figures for most new religious movements owing partly to the fact that the groups themselves, and their critics, both tend to exaggerate their numbers. For instance, on its [website](#), the Church of Scientology claims "today more than 11,000 Scientology Churches, missions, related organizations and affiliated groups minister to millions across 167 nations" and claims to be the fastest growing religious movement on earth (see [Cowan & Bromley](#)). However, these figures are highly contested (see [G. Melton](#)).

Earlier definitions, approaches and methodologies for interpreting NRMs are being increasingly challenged against the backdrop of 'revisionisms' and 'diversification'. The public purview of NRMs is still populated with biases and uncritical presuppositions; with such perceptions hardly doing justice to the complex dynamism of NRMs. Processes of transformation and change are not merely driven by socio-political agendas, economic and cultural realities, and public responses, but also distinctly informed by internal variables, dynamics such as leadership changes, and intergenerational ruptures.



Although change is the norm for NRMs, the contributors to this volume interrogate the processes of revision and diversification that transcend inevitable changes. Employed largely as a value-free concept, revisionism has variously been defined to involve “a significant departure from an authoritative or generally accepted doctrine, theory or practice”; “a shift to something that is recognisably different from something that was initially central to the founder’s and convert’s understanding of the *raison d’être* of the movement”; “a re-vision in so far as it is clearly (to the observer if not to all believers) a new way of seeing The Truth and/or the Right Way”; and it entails “a rejection or radical adaptation of the movement’s erstwhile orthodoxy and/or orthopraxis” (p. 2).

In Chapter 2, Claire Borowik demonstrates how The Family International (formerly Children of God) has undergone radical changes since the demise of its founder, David Berg. It explores beliefs, practices and cultural revisions, and the process of ‘rebooting’ the movement for the future. From its inception in California in 1968, the Family International has been characterised by a long, controversial history, including child abduction and sexual abuse. TFI has undergone much change and progress throughout its 42-year history, in the process of establishing global missionary work. “As a fundamentalist, world-rejecting Christian movement that emerged during the height of the counterculture era of the 1960s, the history... has been characterised by recurrent trends of innovative experimentation and change, adaptation and retrenchment”. In 2010, TFI introduced extensive revisions of its doctrine and practices by means of a sweeping restructuring designated ‘the Reboot’, in an attempt to redefine the course of the movement’s future. TFI [claims](#) to have expanded into a worldwide organization with members in over 90 countries, and serving in over 150 countries since its founding in 1968.

Sun Myung Moon founded and led the Unification Church from 1954 until his death in 2012. His presence and charisma which held together a variety of competing nationalities, ideological orientations, and leadership factions for nearly six decades, ostensibly resulted in speculation as to the fate of a post- Moon Church. In Chapter 4, Michael Mickler assesses the post-Sun Myung Moons’ Unification Church, how the movement has negotiated resilience and transformation of its core beliefs, leadership/organizational structure, public identity, and the implications of such shifts for the movement’s future. Moon was an undoubtedly charismatic founder/leader for nearly six decades, but the post-Moon phase followed ‘a course of routinisation punctuated by periodic outbursts’ (p. 57). Max Weber’s routinisation of charisma and bureaucratisation processes were tested by four next-generation Moon siblings and Moon’s widow, Hak Ja Han; each assuming leadership roles, implementing new models and channelling the movement towards ‘an incipient denominationalism’ (p. 47). The immediate future of the Unification Church will be linked to the Moon family and their quasi-dynastic struggles. What model of the church emerges as the dominant one is as yet an open question (p. 61).

In Chapter 16, Giambalvo, Kropfeld and Langone chronologically explore the development of the North American Cult Awareness Movement; with each decade posing new challenges in terms of its modus operandi, approach, target audience, networking patterns, and contradictions in its developmental strategies. This chapter focuses mainly on two secular organisations with the largest networks of supporters and activities (Cult Awareness Network and American Family Foundation) that emerged as concerned families in North America and Europe organised to find ways to persuade their adolescent children to leave groups they viewed as fringe or dangerous. CAM has played a crucial role in the so-called 'cult scene'. While CAM was partly responsible for several of the revisions that NRMs have undergone since the 1970s, it has itself experienced significant internal radical revisions with the past four decades. The most conspicuous change in the population entering the CAM network after the turn of the millennium was the number of second generation adults who had left the groups (p. 238).

A further strength of the book lies in its focus on the global dimension of NRMs, although as typical of popular books on NRMs, it misses any case studies from Africa. NRMs are local-global in terms of demography, universality of ideologies, value systems, and in growing concern for global humanity. NRMs stand at the crossroads of globalization, challenge the fundamental assumptions of globalization, assess change on their modus operandi, praxis and cosmologies, and self-repositions within the global religious marketplace. Thus, a proper grasp of revisionism and diversification improves our understanding of NRMs under conditions of globality. This book is a must-read for scholars of NRMs, historians of religion, social scientists, and policy makers.

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