



Eileen Barker, 'New religious movements: definitions, variety and numbers'

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Problems with definitions

Most of the movements referred to as part of the current wave of *new* religious movements are new in that they have become visible in their present form since the Second World War; and most are *religious* in the sense that either they offer a religious or philosophical world-view, or they claim to provide the means by which some higher goal such as transcendent knowledge, spiritual enlightenment, self-realisation or 'true' development may be obtained. The term is, thus, used to cover groups that might provide their members with ultimate answers to fundamental questions (such as the meaning of life or one's place in the nature of things).¹

There is, however, no general agreement over precisely what constitutes a religion. Some definitions, by referring to belief in a god, could exclude Buddhism; others are so all-encompassing that they could include ideologies such as Marxism. Even more disagreement surrounds definitions of 'new religious movements' or 'cults'. In an attempt to address the question as to whether or not the Church of Scientology is a religion, Bryan Wilson listed 20 different characteristics, some, but not all, of which would have to be present for a movement to qualify as a religion. He found 11 of these clearly present in Scientology, 5 clearly absent, and the presence of the remaining 4 characteristics arguable.²

Those who object to the term 'new religious movement' frequently do so on the grounds that NRMs are not *real* religions, the assumption often being that religions are seen as 'good', so movements such as ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement) or the Unification Church (popularly known as the Moonies), both of which, by *any* dictionary definition, would be religions, may be denied the label by their opponents. On the other hand, some of the NRMs see religion in negative terms as either a divisive or a lifeless institution, and they do not, therefore, wish to be associated with the term – even if their movement would be covered by most definitions of religion.

There are, moreover, numerous vested interests, both religious and secular, that make any drawing of precise boundaries a contentious and risky exercise. The disagreements over usage of these terms often lead to sterile arguments, in which different groups merely assert their definition in order to make a particular point because of the associations, benefits or restrictions implied by their own or others' understanding of the term. For example, being defined as a religion may mean that an NRM can claim tax exemption; but it may also mean that it is not allowed to be taught in American public schools as a consequence of the First Amendment to the United States' Constitution.³

The Church of Scientology has fought in the courts (successfully in Australia) to be registered as a religion for the purposes of taxation. Transcendental Meditation (TM) has fought in a New Jersey court in an (unsuccessful) attempt to prove that it is *not* a religion but, rather, a technique which might be taught in the state schools. TM describes itself as 'a technique for deep relaxation and revitalisation which develops the inner potential of energy and intelligence that forms the basis of all success in life', and it points out that one can belong to any or to no religion and still practise TM. The Brahma Kumaris (Raja Yoga) provide another example of a movement that would rather not be labelled a religion; they prefer to be seen as a spiritual or educational movement. Ananda Marga, which is against all religions in so far as these are seen as artificial barriers that divide humanity, describes itself as a socio-spiritual organisation. Graduates of the Forum or Exegesis are likely to insist that these are not religious organisations, but that they transcend or go beyond religion in so far as religion is associated with dogma and empty ritual. Rae'lians have referred to their movement as an atheistic religion.

Some of the movements will deny that they are 'new' when their novelty is rooted in a traditional religion. For example, ISKCON devotees consider theirs to be an ancient and a traditional religion. So far as their vedic beliefs and ritual practices are concerned, this is undoubtedly true. None the less, the *organisation*, set up in the West by Srila Prabhupada, is a new organisation that has exhibited several of the characteristics of an NRM since its inception.

Sometimes controversy arises over whether or not one should include groups that have, generally speaking, come to be considered 'respectable', but about which anxious enquiries are, none the less, made to an organisation such as INFORM. Should one, as is sometimes done, label Freemasons, or the numerous professional people (teachers, journalists, lawyers, and writers) who are involved in secret Gurdjieffian groups, cultists or members of NRMs? It has been pointed out that the United Reformed Church (which was formed in 1972 as a union between the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Union of England and Wales) could be called a new religious movement – although few would dream of doing so. And, although most Westerners would consider *Western* Krishna devotees to be members of an NRM, they might be less certain whether to label as 'cultists' the far larger number of worshippers in ISKCON temples in Britain who are drawn from the Asian community and are regarded as little more or less than members of one Hindu tradition among many by most of their fellow Asians. ISKCON is, indeed, a respected member of the National Council of Hindu Temples. The point at issue here is that, explicitly or implicitly, *respectability* or 'cause for concern' are sometimes drawn into the *definition* of what constitutes an NRM (or 'cult'). [...]

Among the better-known of the movements that fall slightly less ambiguously into the general category under consideration are the Ananda Marga, the Bhagwan Rajneesh movement, the Children of God (Family of Love, Heaven's Magic), the Divine Light Mission (Elan Vital), Sahaja Yoga, the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church (the 'Moonies'). Then there is the New Age movement, which, when broadly defined, includes at its 'psycho-spiritual' wing, the Human Potential movement. Paul Heelas has termed many of the groups to be found in such categories the 'self-religions' in that they see the self as the ultimate locus of the Ultimate, and the ego, or some equivalent, as standing in the way of realising the self's true potential.⁴ These groups may draw from a number of diverse sources such as the teachings of Jung, Gurdjieff, Alan Watts and, more recently, L. Ron Hubbard, as well as from various traditions of the East (certain kinds of Buddhism in particular). Examples of these very different groups would be Arica, the Emin, Emissaries of Divine Light, Exegesis (which no longer offers seminars to the public but has developed into Programmes Ltd.), Findhorn, the Forum (a later development of *est*), Insight/MSIA, Primal Therapy, Psychosynthesis, some versions of Rebirthing, the School of Economic Science, Self Transformation (now referred to as the Bellin Partnership), Silva Mind Control, TOPY and a great variety of 'growth centres', encounter, therapeutic, self-development and holistic healing groups.

There are numerous Witches' covens, and pagan, occult and 'magick' movements. Satanism, while itself not exactly a new religion, has been viewed as a cult in recent years, and there are a number of satanic NRMs. There are, furthermore, several groups or organisations that, although still linked to one or other of the mainstream religions, have been thought to exhibit certain sectarian or 'cult-like' characteristics; several Christian groups (Protestant and Catholic) fall into this last category, especially some of those of a more fundamentalist nature that place the winning of converts high among their priorities.

But while attempts to define too precisely what is or is not an NRM are undoubtedly foolhardy, the term should be used within common-sense boundaries. It would clearly be unhelpful to consider Jainism, The Society of Friends, Friends of the Earth or the Wimbledon Pigeon Fanciers Association to be either a 'cult' or an NRM. Those who wish to know more about a mainstream religion, such as Jainism, Islam or Zoroastrianism, that has long been established in other societies but is relatively new to Westerners, might seek further information from the religion's own representatives, or from the Inter Faith Network.

Numbers of movements

The actual number of NRMs in Britain depends upon the definition used (see the previous section), but a figure of around five hundred is not unreasonable. Claims have been made that there are up to 5,000 'cults' in North America, but no one has produced a list of these movements, and anyone who tried to do so would undoubtedly be using a very broad definition – a figure somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 might be more realistic. [...]

Counting members in Britain

An obvious problem, which is related to that discussed in the previous sections, arises when one tries to estimate the total numbers of people involved in NRMs: a decision has to have been made as to what constitutes an NRM. Furthermore, even when one is attempting to count the number of members of a particular NRM, it is important to recognise the enormous diversity in the degree and type of membership that the movements may demand of their followers.

Most NRMs (like most mainstream Churches) have different 'layers' of membership, ranging from full-time service (equivalent to a priesthood), to active followers (similar to devout lay members of a congregation), with yet others who may be classified as constituting a mildly involved band of sympathisers. Another complication is that some people, especially those who have pursued a course with more than one of the self-religions, are quite likely to be counted several times as they move from one path to another. Bearing these problems in mind, what follows can be no more than a tentative attempt to give some idea of the membership of the movements in so far as such information is available.

In Britain, it is unlikely that any of the NRMs has succeeded, at any one time, in accumulating more than a few hundred members who devote their whole lives to working for their movement. It is impossible to estimate the number of people who, while living in their own homes and employed in an 'outside' job are deeply committed, and devote almost all of their spare time to a particular group or movement – rather like, in some ways, the elders or those who organise or devotedly attend the functions of their local church. If, however, an estimate were to be made, it would be likely to be somewhere in the tens of thousands. A greater number of people maintain a more peripheral relationship, which may, none the less, be of considerable importance in their lives. An even greater number will have come into contact with one or other of the movements for a short, transitory period. It is not impossible for members to change the level of their involvement according to their personal circumstances – for example, student (CARP) members of the Unification Church could become either full-time or associate members upon completing their studies.

There could be a million or so people who have, minimally, 'dabbled in' or 'flirted with' one or other of the movements in Britain at some time during the past quarter century. If one were to accept the claim that there is 'a conservative estimated population of over 250,000 Witches/Pagans throughout the UK and many more hundreds of thousands of people with a serious interest in Astrology, Alternative Healing Techniques and Psychic Powers',⁵ and if one were to count such people as members of NRMs, the total could be considerably greater.

¹ See McGuire, M. and Kantor, D. (1989) *Ritual Healing in Suburban America*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.

² 'Scientology: a secularized religion?' in Bryan R. Wilson (1990) *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, Oxford University Press.

³ 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof: or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.'

⁴ Heelas, P. (1982) 'Californian self-religions and socialising the subjective' in E. Barker (ed.) *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society*, New York and Toronto, Edwin Mellen Press, p. 69ff.

⁵ *The Occult Census: Statistical Analysis and Results*, The Sorcerer's Apprentice Press, 1989, p. 3.

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