

# New Religious Movements: current research in Australia

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*New Religious Movements (NRMs) have now become a familiar part of the religious landscape and incorporated into the comparative study of religion in most Departments of Religion at university level. A substantial amount has been written on NRMs – from general accounts of what they are, theories about their emergence, their membership, conversion processes, their strengths and weaknesses, to specific, detailed ethnographies of particular religious groups. There is also a rapidly burgeoning literature on New Age, Nature Religions and Neopaganism as categories in themselves. Research on NRMs covers as diverse a range of approaches as the beliefs and practices of the groups themselves. This paper will discuss theoretical approaches to NRMs in general, and then outline current research on NRMs by Australian academics.*

The diversity of new religious movements defies any easy generalisations concerning them. NRMs vary, from those that are almost indistinguishable from mainstream religious groups to those that are highly coercive, totalistic, and demand absolute obedience to a leader. From the early categories of cult, sect, denomination and church, the term ‘cult’ has come to have entirely negative meanings for most people. In popular usage, the term has become a platform from which to attack any religious group whose practices differ even slightly from the ‘norm’ or from the antagonists’ own religious beliefs.

Responses to NRMs have been polarised. While active, participating members give positive endorsement to their own groups, some ‘defectors’ publicise the negative aspects, and the public is informed about any group by a media that generally focuses upon the bizarre or sensational aspects, leaving little room for anything positive to emerge. Even from within the academy, researchers are sometimes divided into ‘cult apologists’ vs ‘cult bashers’. Anthropologists and sociologists who have devoted long-term research to a particular group and become familiar with its adherents, are more likely to arrive at a more sympathetic and empathic view of the group under study. On the other hand, the psychologist or psychiatrist who works only with dissatisfied apostates with psychological problems, hears some of the negative effects on individuals, and may not take into consideration any positive effects on members who choose to remain in a group.

Another problem inherent in the research situation is that, depending upon

our own beliefs and toleration of difference, we may either tolerate unusual religious phenomena and risk ignoring or diminishing the coerciveness of a particular cult, or condemn them out of hand. Studying religious groups can highlight bias within researchers themselves. Some are implicitly anti-religion, some are pro-religion or sympathetic to specific versions of religion, and others are pro-religion but personally opposed to specific versions.

In Marc Galanter's (1989) edited book *Cults and New Religious Movements*, social scientists and medical specialists join forces to contribute various perspectives on NRMs. This collection of writings illustrates the different professional attitudes towards new religious groups. Some, such as psychiatrist Louis Jolyon West (1989) argue about the negative outcomes, (exploitation or harm of members, disruption of families, and sometimes threats or attacks on critics). Yet others (Kilbourne (1989), Richardson (1989) say that affiliation with new religious movements has demonstrated psychotherapeutic benefits. Kilbourne lists the following: termination of illicit drug use, renewed vocational motivation, mitigation of neurotic distress, suicide prevention, decrease in anomie and moral confusion, increase in social compassion or social responsibility, self-actualisation, decrease in psychosomatic symptoms, clarification of ego identity and problem-solving assistance. No doubt all items on Kilbourne's list could be employed equally by those arguing that NRMs are harmful.

While the vast majority of people who join NRMs do *not* suffer damage because of their involvement, there is nevertheless some *potential* danger in certain groups. The danger is principally, but not exclusively, associated with groups that are headed by charismatic leaders, and the geographic or social isolation of group members (Hume 1996). Psychiatrist, Alexander Deutsch (1989), shows that devotees of a psychotic leader can become pawns for the acting out of a leader's bizarre inner conflict. Indeed, this was illustrated in 1978, when Jim Jones' People's Temple Movement resulted in the suicide/murders of over 900 people in Jonestown, Guyana. This spectacularly gruesome event left an indelible imprint on all subsequent discussions of the dangers inherent in new religious movements led by a charismatic leader.

Nevertheless, media attention invariably focuses on the spectacular, or non-conformist aspects of any group, thus distancing a possibly benign group from those whom the rest of society sees as 'normal'. Often NRMs are only brought to public attention because of accusations of financially deceitful practices by members or leaders, by their coercive membership recruitment practices, or by their purported maltreatment of children. And unfortunately for other minority religions, these accusations, especially if proven true, lead to a general fear of anything that is 'other'. To label all non-mainstream groups with the pejorative term, 'cult', and its members with the equally unfortunate term, 'deviates', is to be ill-informed.

People join a religious community for any number of reasons: rebellion, guidance, nurture, love, search for meaning and purpose in life, alleviation of conflict, escape, self-control, self-esteem, and the search for the numinous. Successful NRMs

(in that they endure into second and third generations) tailor, in some measure, their teachings and practices to achieve congruity between themselves and the changing cultural context in which they operate. In this sense, they are more flexible than mainstream religions that are committed to supposedly timeless valid truths, sanctified by longevity. Some NRMs gain a modicum of respectability as they become more familiar to the mainstream scene, and the general public realises that they have little to fear from them. Yet others stimulate opposition because they take a stand against the status quo of the establishment.

## Theoretical approaches and problems

The underlying sociological assumption regarding NRMs is that they tend to proliferate in conditions of rapid social change. But this does not really help much in providing a theoretical paradigm because this entire century has been one of rapid change. Robbins, Anthony and Richardson (1978) identified four basic variables to explain the emergence of NRMs: secularisation, quest for community, value crisis, and an increasing need for holistic self-definition in a differentiated society.

In the halcyon days of the 'cult' deprogrammers such as Ted Patrick, whose tactics verged on the immoral, if not illegal, young people who joined alternative groups were kidnapped and subjected to treatment that was equally as bad as, if not worse, than that from which they were supposedly being rescued. Early thoughts on NRMs tended towards viewing recruits as passive actors upon whom social forces operated. Lofland and Stark (1965) introduced another perspective – one that looked at the individual as active rather than passive, as a seeker, rather than one who was sought after. The later work of these researchers (see especially Lofland 1976) investigated how people go about converting themselves, as active instigators searching for self-growth experiences and a more satisfying lifestyle.

In *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*, Robert Ellwood (1973) saw the rise in cults as heralding a new style of personality in the West – one that reacts against orthodoxy, disdaining doctrinal bias, seeking instead, to experience a personal spirituality. J. Gordon Melton (1982) points out that there is a 'new religious consciousness', a new self-awareness and spiritual sensitivity that demonstrates a synthesis between Western and Eastern beliefs. The emphasis on the experience rather than the word has persisted into the 1990s, and the focus on self-awareness and the 'spiritual experience' has also seeped into the New Age movement. Paul Heelas (1996) calls the New Age a 'celebration of the self', viewing it as both an alternative counter-cultural movement, and a radical spiritual alternative to the mainstream. Wouter Hanegraaf's (1998) almost encyclopedic coverage of the New Age follows the theme of esotericism in the mirror of secular thought.

Geoffrey Nelson (1987) suggests that the rise and decline of NRMs follow a fairly predictable pattern. A decline of influence of traditional institutional religion creates a situation in which many people seek answers to questions of meaning and

morality. Some find this in a return to dogmatic, fundamentalist forms of traditional faith, others adopt religious faiths derived from other cultures, or seek a revival of older indigenous faiths. Yet others formulate their own system. From these private faiths new religions, or cults, may arise. Private faiths, often led by a charismatic leader, communicate their ideas to others, form a small nucleus of followers who then spread the message. If they are to succeed, they need to adopt techniques for recruitment and retention of members. For continued success (into the second and third generations) they need to be flexible enough to adapt to changing social conditions. Successful movements then begin to attract larger numbers of followers which moves them to the status of a world religion. Large monopolistic religions with state-backed power repress rival faiths, which then leads to revolt and revolution, which opens up the situation to creative thought and the rise of other new religious and ideological movements.

A general scheme for understanding NRMs in the West is Roy Wallis's (1984) tripartite typology based on a group's orientation to the world: world-accommodating, world-rejecting, or world-affirming. This typology provides a useful heuristic device for the classification of NRMs. *World-accommodating* emphasises solace or stimulation to the person's interior life. Although it may invigorate the person for life in the world, it does not dictate how that life should be lived. *World-affirming* emphasises improving the world, and offers techniques for releasing or enhancing human potential to achieving whatever goals are set. *World-rejecting* demands a life of service to a guru or prophet, condemns society and its values, anticipates an imminent upheaval in social arrangements, and expects a better world order to follow this upheaval.

Chalfant, Beckley and Palmer (1994) give a comprehensive number of theoretical approaches to the sociology of religion, from the macro to micro theoretical perspectives on religion and society. Other typologies of NRMS, offered by various scholars include: personal empowerment, group dedication, charismatic leadership, the occult, mysticism, nature worship, religious unity, globalisation, healing, and even para and quasi religions. The Wilson and Cresswell (1999) book, *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, incorporates articles from various authors on the significance of NRMs, Easternisation of the West, legal dimensions, mass media, mental health, women in NRMs, NRMs and the Church, and NRMs in various countries.

Clearly, there are many aspects to NRMs, and the field is still one that is rich in research possibilities, especially here in Australia. Issues such as: identity, sense of community, individualism, gender studies, ecology, self-transformation and the nature of the religious experience itself, have been researched fairly extensively but not exhaustively. And there are other exciting possibilities for research that include: re-enchantment, entertainment, spiritual tourism, cyber-spirituality, conflict and politics within groups, and the interface with mainstream religions and indigenous spirituality. The anti-cult movement, and legal aspects of NRMs are yet other areas

for research in this country. Indeed, some Australian researchers have already embarked on studies such as the aforementioned, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

## Current research in Australia

I would like firstly, to mention Ward and Humphreys's very useful (1995) book, *Religious Bodies in Australia* which gives a comprehensive listing of all religious groups in Australia. Not only are the mainstream monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, listed in sub-sections such as Trinitarian Christians and non-Trinitarian Christians, but these two categories are again broken down into more detailed sub-groups (such as Eastern Orthodox, Orient/Ancient Easter Christians, Pentecostal etc.). As well, there are sections on 'Buddhism', 'Other World Monotheistic Religions', 'Mental, psychic and other Religions', and even a section on "Nature and Traditional Religions", each of which has its own sub-group.

Ward and Humphreys show that in 1991, the largest majority of Australians (73.8%) declared themselves to be Christians. Gary Bouma's data (1997) shows that by 1996, the percentage of people declaring themselves to be Christian on the census forms decreased to 70.55%. (However, the population of Australia grew by 5.36% during this time, which probably reflects an increase in non-Christian immigrants.) The category 'no religion' increased significantly between 1991 and 1996, from 12% to 16.61%. Bouma's analysis of the statistics shows that in 1996, a significant number of Australians identified under the loose rubric of 'New Age' religion, which included a diverse range of smaller groups such as Spiritualism, nature religion, and Wicca. Although this category is still small in percentage terms compared to those identifying as Christians, they nevertheless comprise a significant *number* of people - over 30,000 in fact, and their numbers are growing (Bouma 1997).

In 1996, two books were published which deal with the cultural history of religion in Australia: Hilary Carey's *Believing in Australia*, and Gary Bouma's edited book *Many Religions, All Australian*. Both books contribute to our understanding of the historical settlement of religious groups in Australia. As Bouma points out in his book's Overview, one of the unintended consequences of post-war immigration to Australia was the alteration in the religious profile of Australians. Although there has been a successful integration of a multitude of religions in this country, Bouma suggests that caution is still needed so that newly emergent religious diversity may continue to be handled with justice and equity, and religion-based harassment and discrimination can be avoided. Contributors to the book include historians, sociologists, an Anglican priest, a specialist in human rights, and Rachael Kohn, sociologist of religion and presenter of "The Spirit of Things" on the A.B.C.'s Radio National. It is Rachael Kohn's article (Kohn 1996) that is pertinent for our discussion here, as she writes on cults and the New Age in Australia.

Kohn posits that a religiously diverse society can bring with it some not so

pleasant religious elements. She points out that three of the most recently publicised religious groups that have come to a bad end have had significant connections with Australia. Aum Shinri Kyo, whose leader and followers were responsible for the 1995 Tokyo subway poison gas attack, had actually purchased property in Western Australia, preparatory to establishing themselves there. The Solar Temple, associated with murder-suicides in Canada, Switzerland and France established themselves on Queensland's Gold Coast after their leaders claimed to have received revelations connected with Ayres Rock (Uluru). David Koresh's Branch Davidians also had Australian connections, and some members were Australian.

While the term 'cult' is avoided by many sociologists of religion who prefer to use the less value-laded terms 'minority religions' or 'alternative religions', Kohn insists on using the term. She summarises 'cult' as "an original, leader-focused, and highly demanding religious group which usually withdraws from engagement with the larger society except for recruitment purposes" (Kohn 1996:154). She then points to groups with leaders who have had high profile media attention because of their bizarre and potentially dangerous elements, such as Anne Hamilton-Byrne, founder of The Family in Victoria, who inculcated in her adopted children-disciples the belief that she was Jesus Christ reborn. Another very small Sydney group (27 members) cited by Kohn is The Pod, whose leader Stuart Walker also claimed (in 1995) to be Jesus Christ reborn.

Kohn concludes by implicitly raising the issue of whether there should be legal or other protective measures to restrict the activities of some religious groups. Gary Bouma, however, questions this approach, declaring that it is arguable that one religion is 'dangerous' while another is 'safe', and that banning any particular group means narrowing a person's freedom of choice. People who are born into a religious orientation, he says, are not able to compare it to others until well into young adult life. It is preferable, continues Bouma, to follow the principle 'buyer beware' with regard to the religious marketplace as well as to other marketable commodities, rather than to restrict people's freedom of choice through legislation.

Juliet Sheen (1996) takes an entirely different approach to that of Rachael Kohn. Sheen sees most minority religious groups as victims of hatred, misunderstanding and harassment. She advocates the need for recognition and respect of difference, and for equal treatment before the law. The struggle with plurality in belief, she points out, lies at the heart of freedom of religion and belief. And the existence of safeguards in the law that emphasise *tolerance* are essential. Sheen's article gives an informative account of Australian mechanisms for the redress of religious discrimination. She concludes that matters which have been highlighted by critics of new religious movements could be addressed in a more positive framework, namely, in the form of internal dialogue and policy development.

Both Kohn and Sheen, although approaching the problems surrounding minority religions from different angles, are nevertheless advocating similar positions – the human right of freedom of religion with the minimum of restrictions imposed

on the individual. However, while Kohn highlights the dangers of past groups, Sheen sees minority religions in a more positive light and advocates caution in legislating against religious freedom.

The media hold the key to educating or misleading the general public on any matter, and this also applies to religious matters. Journalistic bias can sway public opinions toward positive or negative reactions simply by the stand they take themselves. This is articulated by James Richardson (1996) who demonstrates that considerable bias and misinformation in media coverage of minority religions has occurred in both the U.S. and in Australia in the past. He gives specific examples, citing one Australian journalist who faced ethics charges in relation to a biased story written about religious groups in Australia.

Australia is only beginning to be confronted with issues that have been debated for many years in the U.S. It remains to be seen whether or not these issues will be dealt with any differently in light of the quite substantial amount of information we now have. Increasing interest in studying religions of all kinds, by academics as well as those outside academia, will hopefully lead to a more informed public and a media that will not pursue the 'shock' element of a story from fragmented accounts and ill-informed sources.

Rowan Ireland's forthcoming handbook of information on new religious groups and associations in Australia contains information that has principally been collected from the religious groups themselves. The groups were asked to provide brief outlines of their origins, main beliefs and practices, ways of attracting or recruiting members, induction procedures, mode of financing, organisation and type of leadership in the group, size and profile of membership, and any 'outreach' activities. While acknowledging that information provided in the handbook does not constitute the complete and final 'truth' about a group, Ireland's main purpose in presenting these group profiles is to inform a wider audience than that of academia of their existence, and to dispel harmful reactions based on ignorance. His ongoing study can be sited on the Web at <http://www.une.edu.au/~arts/StudinRelig/nrm.htm>.

Some of the groups listed in Rowan Ireland's handbook have been researched already by Australian academics. An in-depth study of one comparatively small, but rapidly growing group can be found in Lynne Hume's (1997) book, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia*. In this detailed ethnographic account of Neopaganism, and in particular Wicca, Hume argues that Wicca can be considered a 'religion' according to Ninian Smart's definition of religion as containing six major constituents: the practical and ritual, the experiential and emotional, the narrative or mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, and the social, institutional and material. Taking a multi-disciplinary approach, Hume relates how pagan worldviews relate to contemporary environmentalism, feminism, morality and mainstream religions. She discusses pagan rituals, what constitutes the spiritual experience, and the notion of magic. In her other work on Wicca, she covers witchcraft and the law in Australia (Hume 1995a), how imported nature religions reconstruct northern

hemisphere myths in the southern hemisphere (Hume 1999), the way in which the symbolism of a sacred circle reflects Wiccan cosmology (Hume 1998), and the similarities between mental imagery cultivation in Paganism and indigenous shamanism (Hume 1995b). Hume has also published work on Aboriginal Australians and is interested in the interface between the New Age and Australian Aborigines. Her current interests include the anthropology of consciousness and altered states of consciousness. Her approaches are phenomenological and interdisciplinary with foundations in anthropology.

Other research on aspects of the New Age and Aborigines is being investigated by PhD candidates Jane Mulcock at Department of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, and Stewart Muir, Sociology and Anthropology, La Trobe University. Mulcock is investigating the representation and incorporation of indigenous culture in the New Age and other alternative spiritualities, cultural synthesis and hybridity; and Muir, Aboriginal interactions and involvement with the New Age.

More interest in Neopaganism and associated groups is being demonstrated by other academics and current doctoral candidates. Geoffrey Samuel, (Sociology & Anthropology, University of Newcastle), who has published extensively on Tibetan and South Asian religion, now turns his attention to Nature Religions, Paganism and their comparison with Buddhism (Samuel 1998). James Wafer (Sociology and Anthropology, University of Newcastle), takes an interdisciplinary approach, based in anthropology, to investigate gay and lesbian alternative religious movements such as the Radical Fairy movement in Australia. Adam Possamai (University of Western Sydney), whose interests are Neopaganism, history and myths as popular culture, comics and alternative spiritualities, and the New Age wrote about the New Age as a sociology of perennism in his unpublished PhD thesis (1998), and a (1999) article considers the New Age as the Aquarian utopia. He also has a recently published (1999) article on diversity in alternative spiritualites and a forthcoming publication on nature religions and Neopaganism.

Doctoral candidates Lyndon Northeast (Sociology, University of Tasmania) and Daniel Bray, (Religious Studies, University of Sydney) are researching Wicca and notions of time (Northeast), and Indo-European mythology, Paganism and Asatru, cyberspace and technoshamanism (Bray). Further studies on the topic of technoshamanism are being carried out by David Pecotic (Religious Studies, University of Sydney) and Richard Sutcliffe (Anthropology, University of Melbourne). Pecotic is exploring the relationship between technology, time and Western esotericism, UFO abducteeism, and virtual self-spirituality; Sutcliffe is also exploring rave dance culture. Graham St. John (Sociology, La Trobe) has recently completed a PhD on ecospirituality and eco-radical activism, youth cultures, (especially ferals), and neo-tribes such as Down to Earth. His PhD is available on the Web, at <http://www.angelfire.com/pq/edgecentral>.

Another interesting area of studies on alternative religions and spiritualities is



one that focuses on Eastern religions that have been imported to Australia and undergone changes on their arrival. Julia Howell (Modern Asian Studies, Griffith University) has researched NRMs in both Western and Asian Societies. Howell's co-authored publications with Peter Nelson include the adaptations and transplantation of the Brahma-Kumaris in the Western World (Howell and Nelson Part I, 1997; Part II, in press); and gender roles in new religious movements, specifically the Brahma-Kumaris (Howell 1998). She is interested in globalisation, organisational dynamics, interactions between religious movements and structures and broader social processes like modernisation, colonial and post-colonial transformations of third world societies. Her interdisciplinary studies of altered states of consciousness in NRMs, involve collaboration with psychologists and incorporate consciousness studies (Howell and Nelson 1993-1994; Howell 1997).

Other researchers focusing on the adaptation of Eastern religions in Australia include Michelle Spuler (Religious Studies, University of Wellington, New Zealand), Celia Genn (Studies in Religion, University of Queensland) and Chris Hartney, (Religious Studies, University of Sydney). Michelle Spuler's Ph.D dissertation (1999) was on the adaptation of Japanese Zen Buddhism in Australia, specifically the Diamond Sangha groups. Her current interests extend to the broader topics of religion and multiculturalism, as well as the New Age. Celia Genn is researching Western adaptations of Eastern religions, the history and development of Sufi groups in Australia, the teacher/student relationship, and the nature of mystical experience for her almost completed doctoral dissertation. Chris Hartney is currently researching Caodaism and Hoa Hao in Vietnam, Caodaism in Sydney, and Dai Dao, a small syncretic religion in Taiwan with branches in Australia. Hartney's overall research interests are new religious movements in Asia, and their arrival in Australia, and syncretism.

The diversity of current research being undertaken by Australian researchers in the area of new religious movements has by no means been exhausted. Using both psychoanalytic and sociological theory, Lyn Baker (Sociology, LaTrobe) is investigating the relationship between unconscious childhood processes and how these might relate to religious affiliation, beliefs and practices in NRMs in adulthood. Mathew Charet (University of Sydney) is working on Haile Selassie as divinity in Rastafarianism. Douglas Ezzy's (Sociology, University of Tasmania) interests span Pentecostal conversion, Paganism, mysticism, and how people living with HIV make sense of their life. He uses narrative theory, and symbolic interactionism. Justine Digance (Religious Studies, University of Sydney) is working on hallmarks of pilgrimage in both traditional and modern pilgrimage, and spiritual tourism, and Janet Kahl (Religious Studies, University of Sydney) is researching Australian Marian pilgrimage sites. Sylvie Shaw (Monash University) is investigating non-Aboriginal Australian nature-based religions and relationships with the land.

Among the Australian scholars who are lecturing on aspects of new religious movements are Merv Bendle (Sociology, James Cook University) whose general

interests are in religious difference, cultural pluralism, globalisation, and deviance, and Carole Cusack (Religious Studies, University of Sydney) who has a broad interest in NRMs generally, in spiritual pilgrimage, and secrecy in religions.

From the preceding (non-exhaustive) list, we can see that there is growing research interest in new religious movements in Australia and that, while a number of different disciplines are being employed, an inter-disciplinary approach is preferred. Because of the large variety of new religious movements in this country, and their increasing popularity, we need careful scholarly investigation into this area of religious studies, both in-depth research on particular religious groups, as well as research that provides us with theoretical insights.

This is important, given that the media often focuses on anecdotal and sensational aspects, alarming the general public with information that, in some cases, is highly suspect. Also, while maintaining freedom of religion, we need to be aware that in some cases, there may well be causes for concern. This has been amply demonstrated by the AUM Supreme Truth group in Tokyo, and in the more distant past, the Jonestown suicide/massacre in Guyana. An informed academy, and an educated public might also help us to avoid the debacle that occurred in Waco, Texas, with the unfortunate members of David Koresh's group. Nevertheless, we do not want to raise unwarranted cause for alarm, and accuse the religious 'other' of engaging in activities that do not warrant the 'thought police' proclaiming what people should or should not believe.

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