

Eileen Barker (ed.)

Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements

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It is impossible to generalise new religious movements (NRMs). This is one of the firm statements that the renowned scholar of religions Eileen Barker is known for insisting upon. In this volume, edited by Eileen Barker, the assertion is confirmed. The book is an excellent example of how it is possible to show the diversity of NRMs, analyse the developments of the movements and, at the same time, contribute to the theory of religious organisations.

The book brings together analyses of 14 different NRMs, followed by an account of the development of the main institutional adversary to NRMs, the Cult Awareness Movement. Finally David G. Bromley discusses the themes and main outcomes of the various contributions. It is especially this final chapter which elegantly ties the knot between Eileen Barker's introduction, the rich empirical material presented in the book and the overall theoretical contribution – I will come back to his chapter below.

In the introduction, Eileen Barker outlines the key concepts of the book: as a working definition New Religious Movements are defined as a religion with a predominantly first-generation membership, a group which is likely to appeal to a membership atypical of the rest of the population, a group with a leadership that often claims charismatic authority, a group which often experiences tension with the rest of the society and a group which is liable to fundamental changes (p. 2). It is these rapid changes, seen through the lens of the key concepts of "revision" and "diversification" that are the focus of this volume.

The selection of authors reflects the diversity of the field of NRMs in two ways. Firstly by including chapters which span the spectrum from the development of the most well-known movements of the 1970s onwards (The Family International by Claire Borowik, ISKCON by E. Burke Rochford Jr., The Unification Church by Michael L. Mickler, The Church of Scientology by Hugh B. Urban and the Branch Davidians by Eugene V. Gallagher) to lesser known movements (The Orthodox Church of the Sovereign Mother of God by J. Eugene Clay and La Mission de l'Esprit-Saint by Susan J. Palmer) and chapters covering non-Western movements (Aum Shinkikyō/Hikari no Wa by Erica Baffeli, Falungong by James W. Tong, Hizb ut Tahrir by Shiraz Maher and Mujahedin e Khalegh by Masoud Banisadr). Finally, a section is devoted to developments of older groups (The Latter Day Saints by Massimo Introvigne, Esotericism

and the New Age Movement by J. Gordon Melton and communal movements such as The Farm and the Hutterites by Timothy Miller).

But the book also encompasses diversity through the selection of the authors of the contributions. Among the authors are scholars as well as current and former members of the movements – some of whom have turned into scholars. Thus the book also finely exemplifies Eileen Barker's work at INFORM – with her insistence on hearing and including all agents of the discussion concerning NRMs.

All chapters are focused on the nature of the development of the movements. Throughout the volume this presents a rather kaleidoscopic picture. Many of the movements have developed toward accommodating the society and the mainstream religious community, such as the Family, The Latter Day Saints, Hikari no Wa and ISKCON. But other movements stay marginal, such as The Orthodox Church of the Sovereign Mother of God and Mujahedin e Khalegh. Some religious leaders are intensifying their claim for charismatic authority, such as the leader of Falungong Li Hongzhi, while others are denouncing the claim of charisma, such as one of the siblings of Sun Myung Moon Kook Kin Boon – while yet others are revising the intensity of the charismatic claim, such as in the revisions in the biographies of the founders of Scientology and Latter Day Saints. Some movements face intense schisms, some movements are rather stable. Some are flourishing, some are dwindling. Thus the variety of chapters confirms the initial statement that it is impossible to generalise.

However, this kaleidoscope leads up to David G. Bromley's chapter "Changing Vision, Changing Course: En-Visioning/Re-visioning and Concentration/Diversification in NRMs". Here, he argues for applying a process-based rather than a factor-based analysis when dealing with NRMs in order to avoid analysing fragments rather than to integrate insights into how these types of movements develop and adjust. On the basis of the many movements analysed in the book, Bromley suggests four processes common to the ongoing processes of the NRMs. Two processes (*envisioning* and *concentration*), which further cohesion, and two counterbalancing processes (*revisioning* and *diversification*), which further change:

Envisioning refers to the how the movement collectively is imagining the meaning, mission and purpose of the movement – for example, in deciding the nature and source of humankind's problems, what stance to adopt toward conventional society and how much moral authority to claim for the movement and its leader (p. 248).

Concentration refers to means of achieving membership growth, developing social cohesiveness and establishing an authority/governance structure, as well as to how to make transcendent power a lived reality within the movement (pp. 251-53).

These two processes are counterbalanced by:

Revisioning, which refers to the decisions that represent significant departures from previously established authoritative theory or practices since NRMs are characterised by being in a developing process concerning myths, rituals, leadership and organisational structure under the influences of both external push- and internal pull factors (pp. 253-56).

Finally, *Diversification* refers to the process where a more or less established movement horizontally or vertically diversifies – for example, due to age distribution, the death of a leader, waning engagement of the members or geographical dispersion (pp. 256-59).

The four processes taken together offer a perspective on NRMs as lived religion, thus focusing on NRMs as a laboratory for studying religious development.

Summing up, the book is highly recommendable. On the one hand it offers insights into a great variety of NRMs through chapters that offer analytic insights into the specificities of the particular movement described. On the other hand, the individual chapters feed into the development of the theoretical concept and confirm the overall claim that although NRMs are indeed too diverse to be generalised, they do have revisionism and diversification in common.
