
# Encyclopedia of Religion in America

## New Religious Movements: Twentieth Century

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The term *new religious movements* (NRMs) emerged in the 1970s as a way of delineating sect and cult movements from churches. A *church,* in the U.S. context, is an established religious denomination that traces its origins to one of the historic European confessions. A *sect movement,* on the other hand, is usually formed when members of a church become disillusioned and leave (or are forced to leave) their church and set up a new religious community. A *cult movement* has a great deal in common with a sect movement, in that it tends to have a dense social structure, exists in a significant degree of tension with the surrounding culture, and favors charismatic leadership. The major difference is that cult movements are not offshoots of conventional churches but, rather, are independent creations of their founders. The adoption of the term *new religious movements* was also a way of moving beyond the word *cult,* which had become the term used by the anti-cult or countercult movements to describe any controversial, nontraditional religious organization. This use of *cult* became particularly pronounced following the November 1978 Jonestown mass suicides. Although scholars recognize that the term *new* is problematic—for example, when discussing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which was founded in 1830—the designation remains the standard for scholars of sect and cult movements.

The mid-to-late twentieth century saw two trends that appeared to accelerate the formation and reach of NRMs in U.S. society. First, the 1965 Immigration Act opened the United States to an influx of Asian religious teachers, who brought varieties of Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, and Islam to U.S. spiritual seekers. Christianity, though still dominant, began sharing the religious landscape with rapidly growing communities (both immigrant and native) of each of these traditions. Second, the 1960s counterculture coincided with a widespread disillusionment with conventional Christian churches. These churches came to be viewed as overly accommodated to the U.S. consumerist, militarist, and secularist mainstream culture. The counterculture promoted a more experiential and experimental approach to religion and provided a steady stream of potential recruits to the emerging NRMs of the late 1960s and 1970s.

## Representative New Religious Movements

Several NRMs have gained a high degree of public notoriety during the past forty years and deserve special attention. The first of these, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), was brought to the United States in 1965 by the Indian teacher, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977). Prabhupada taught a traditional form of Hindu devotional religion focused on the figure of Krishna. In Prabhupada's view, Krishna is the Supreme Lord of all creation, superior to the traditional triad of Hindu supreme gods, including Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. By worshipping Krishna in special *pujas,* or worship rites, and by chanting his principle mantra, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare, Hare,” devotees believe that they will achieve salvation. ISKCON members revere the Bhagavad Gita, one of Krishna's special scriptures, and distribute Prabhupada's special translation and commentary on this work.

In the early years of the movement, members dressed in traditional Hindu garb, shaved their heads (except for a shock of hair on the rear of the head), and marked their foreheads with two stripes of sacred clay signifying the lotus feet of Krishna. They lived as celibate monks, ate vegetarian food, and chanted daily rounds of the group's mantra. Prabhupada opened centers in major U.S. cities and financed this expansion largely through the sale of books and incense. One successful ISKCON outreach was the offering of free vegetarian

lunches at their worship centers or on university campuses. Members took the opportunity to share their beliefs and distribute literature while students enjoyed the free food.

Swami Prabhupada died in 1977, having appointing eleven successor gurus who had regional authority. This provision for his succession was crucial because the group believed that devotees must work under a spiritual master of impeccable lineage. There was also a governing body council (GBC), whose thirty members met annually to elect secretaries to govern administrative zones. In time the successor gurus began to clash with the GBC and each other, leading to charges of exploitation, criminal enterprises, and even murder. One guru, Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, the head of the New Vrindaban community in rural West Virginia, was convicted of racketeering and conspiracy to murder.

Following these developments, many members moved out of the group's communal institutions and set up life as “householders,” with jobs in the world and traditional family duties. More scandals rocked the group in the late 1990s, with the disclosure that many children who were sent to the group's boarding schools in the 1970s and 1980s suffered sexual, physical, and psychological abuse. ISKCON has taken significant steps to reach out to these children and offer them counseling and cash settlements.

## Church Universal and Triumphant

A second controversial group is Church Universal and Triumphant, founded by Mark L. Prophet in 1958 in Washington, D.C., as the Summit Lighthouse. Prophet believed he had been granted the mantle of “messenger” from the Ascended Masters, the advanced adepts who govern the spiritual evolution of Earth in the theosophical tradition. He began to publish “dictations” from the masters and to build a small following across North America.

The Summit's teachings included the practice of *decreeing,* a form of verbal affirmation that connected the I AM Presence—the divine inner nature of the disciple—with the outer personality and its needs. Followers believed they could overcome negative conditions in the world and in their own lives through this practice.

Members also believed in the path of “ascension,” which stipulated that the goal of life was the union of the human soul with the Divine Being in heaven. Each human being was seen to possess a tripartite nature consisting of the I AM presence, the Christ Consciousness (a mediator between the human and divine planes of existence), and a human soul. By following Prophet's graded path of initiation, students hoped to gain freedom from negative karmic predispositions, merge with the Christ Consciousness, and achieve final ascension at death.

Prophet and his wife, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, also taught that the United States was destined to become the world's exemplar of spiritual enlightenment. First, however, evils such as socialism, rock and jazz music, abortion, and pacifism must be overcome. The Prophets adopted a nationalistic and virulently anticommunist political outlook that advocated a build-up of strategic nuclear weapons and the creation of a missile defense system. Following Mark Prophet's death in 1973, Elizabeth Prophet took over the movement and renamed it Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT). She proclaimed her movement the true church of Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ in the Aquarian age, moved its headquarters from Colorado to Southern California, and successfully established teaching centers and study groups across the United States.

After a bitter lawsuit initiated by an ex-member that exposed the church to a rash of negative publicity in the mid 1980s, the movement transferred its headquarters again to the Royal Teton Ranch in Paradise Valley, Montana. Following a series of dictations predicting the likelihood of nuclear war with the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, members began moving to Paradise Valley from around the world and constructing fallout shelters high in the Grand Tetons. In March 1990 members entered the shelters, believing nuclear war was imminent. When this and other prophesied events failed to transpire, membership dropped precipitously, and the church was forced to retrench and reinvent itself. It was labeled a “doomsday cult” by the media, and Prophet appeared on national television programs such as *Oprah Winfrey* and *Nightline* to defend the church's teachings.

CUT was downsized in the mid-1990s and began to sell parcels of its ranch to meet operational expenses. Under new leadership, CUT has jettisoned its apocalyptic teachings and focused on spreading the Prophets’ New Age teachings via print and electronic media worldwide. The church has also built international communities where members practice the Prophets’ teachings on esoteric spirituality, alternative healing, and children's education. Another crisis occurred in 1999 when Prophet admitted she had Alzheimer's disease. Following Prophet's resignation from her positions of spiritual and temporal authority, the church was turned over to a new president, board of directors, and council of elders. The church is a case study in the hazards of charismatic leadership and apocalyptic ideology.

## Peoples Temple

Peoples Temple is practically synonymous with the U.S. public's view of NRMs as “dangerous cults,” whose members are “brainwashed” by unscrupulous charismatic leaders. The Temple was founded as the Community Unity Church in 1954 by a white preacher, Jim Jones (1931–1978), in Indianapolis, Indiana. This multiracial, Pentecostal-flavored church was renamed the Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church in 1955 and became known in Indiana for its faith-healing services and controversial teachings on racial justice and “apostolic socialism.” Jones visited the Peace Mission movement of Father Divine in 1956 and soon adopted local versions of the Philadelphia mission's social outreach programs, such as soup kitchens and the distribution of food and clothing.

Following his 1961 vision of nuclear holocaust in the U.S. Midwest, Jones took his community to Ukiah, California, believing the Redwood Valley north of San Francisco was an area that would escape this apocalyptic destruction. From humble beginnings, the church grew into a large community of twenty thousand members that included centers in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Ukiah. Jones' headquarters, Happy Acres, included a senior citizen home, child-care facilities, residences, and meeting halls. Jones hosted a radio program on KFAX and led dramatic services that included faith healing and purported resurrections of deceased members. By the early 1970s Jones was telling selected followers that he was God in the flesh and that his mission was to establish justice, peace, and prosperity in the world. He was awarded various humanitarian awards, gained a seat on the San Francisco Housing Authority, and was courted by local, state, and national politicians.

A negative newspaper article led to the defection of several key aides beginning in 1973, and Jones inaugurated plans to relocate his community to the socialist country of British Guyana in South America. In 1974, the temple leased three thousand acres of jungle and began the construction of the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project. Jones spoke of the project as the "promised land" that was to be a refuge for his people from the injustices and persecutions of the U.S. government. Advance notice of a scathing magazine exposé of the Temple's financial misdeeds and abuse of its members led Jones to take one thousand of his followers to Guyana in August 1977. African Americans constituted most of the community's membership in Guyana, and women outnumbered men by approximately 66 percent to 33 percent.

At first the Temple's Guyana experiment seemed to thrive. It billed itself as a socialist utopia where persecuted minorities could live in dignity free from ageism, sexism, and racism. A group of ex-members called the Committee of Concerned Relatives told a different story, however, claiming that members at the project were subjected to mandatory labor, physical abuse, and extreme isolation from the outside world. The charges prompted California congressman Leo Ryan to lead a delegation of investigators to Jonestown in November 1978. As Ryan was about to return to the United States, several members asked to leave with his entourage, causing upheaval in the tightly knit community. Shortly after Ryan's departure, Jones ordered the temple's security guards to assassinate Ryan and several others as they boarded a small plane on a secluded runway near the project. When news of these events reached Jones, he instigated an act of "revolutionary suicide," in which members and their children drank Kool-Aid mixed with cyanide. When law enforcement officials arrived at the camp, 914 members lay dead on the ground. Jones himself was found shot in the head.

News of the Jonestown mass deaths immediately changed the climate for NRMs in the United States. The anticult movement used the national shock and revulsion at the event to advocate governmental regulation of "dangerous cults," and the media began to cast a suspicious eye on other NRMs such as the Unification Church and Church Universal and Triumphant. Jonestown became a kind of lens through which the U.S. public viewed all new and alternative religious communities. This negative public view of new religions has been reinforced by other sensational episodes of violence in NRMs, such as the 1993 Branch Davidian siege and the 1997 mass suicides of the Heaven's Gate community near San Diego, California. There is still some controversy about whether the Jonestown event should be considered a mass suicide or a mass murder.

## Divine Light Mission

Another significant NRM of the twentieth century is the Divine Light Mission (DLM). This group is rooted in the Sikh-based Sant Mat tradition of North India, which teaches the existence of a universal current of sacred sound that preserves the cosmos. The mission's founder, Shri Hans Ji Maharaj (1900–1966), was a Sant Mat master who taught secret meditation techniques that enabled his students to hear and commune with this current. Following Shri Hans' death, his mission spread throughout the world under the guidance of his wife, Mata Ji, and his four sons. Eventually the youngest of Shri Hans' sons, Maharaji (1959–), was chosen as his father's successor. Maharaji sent missionaries to the United Kingdom in late 1969 and to the United States and Canada in the early 1970s. The "boy guru" first visited the West in 1971, and the Divine Light Mission spread rapidly as he traveled from city to city in the United States. Maharaji often traveled with his mother and three brothers, who collectively were referred to as the "divine family" by devotees. Maharaji himself was called the "Lord of the Universe."

The basic teachings of the DLM were fairly simple. Followers (called "premies") embraced ideals of universal love, peace, and devotion to their "Satguru" Maharaji, whom they believed to be the avatar of a new millennium. They practiced four meditation techniques designed to open their spiritual senses, so they could taste the nectar of immortality, hear the universal sound of creation, and see the divine light. The techniques (called "knowledge") were revealed in a secret initiation ceremony and were never to be divulged to nonmembers. As ashrams appeared in major U.S. cities, a new international headquarters was established in Denver, Colorado, in 1972. Premies (including former student activist Rennie Davis) sponsored huge festivals around the country, including one at the Houston Astrodome in 1973. They took traditional monastic vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience; sang devotional songs before large photos of Maharaji mornings and evenings; and practiced the "knowledge" meditations.

The first signs of trouble occurred in 1974 following Maharaji's marriage to a California airline stewardess and his mother's subsequent attempt to depose him as head of the mission in favor of her eldest son, Bal Bhagwan Ji. These troubles did not prevent Maharaji from amassing a small fortune that included luxurious mansions in Miami Beach and Malibu, and a fleet of luxury cars and private jets. As Maharaji entered adulthood in the early 1980s, he decided to close the mission's ashrams and to rename his movement, Elan Vital. He assumed all initiatory powers (formerly his lieutenants or "mahatmas" could initiate followers into the "knowledge"), embarked on a series of teaching tours around the world, and began a distribution company to market his videos, audiotapes, and publications.

During the past twenty-five years, Maharaji has brought his teachings to millions of people in more than fifty countries. Satellite broadcasts of Maharaji's discourses reach eighty-eight countries and are translated into more than sixty languages. The basic thrust of his teaching has remained remarkably consistent throughout his long career: finding inner peace through devotion to Maharaji is the necessary first step to bringing about world peace. Like other NRMs of the twentieth century, Elan Vital has found a way to survive through sophisticated marketing of a charismatic teacher in video, audio, and printed formats.

## Unification Movement

One of the more controversial NRMs of the twentieth-century United States is the Unification movement (UM). Its founder, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–), gained national notoriety during the 1980s when he was convicted of tax evasion and sentenced to prison. Moon made a dramatic comeback in the late 1980s, and today he heads a worldwide empire that includes industrial, commercial, media, and educational enterprises. UM can be described as a messianic movement because its leader, Moon, is believed by his followers to be the messiah who has come to complete the unfinished work of the first messiah, Jesus Christ. UM can also be considered a social movement, in that Moon has created myriad organizations that promote a unified world through conferences, mass meetings, and social activism.

Moon founded his church in 1954 in South Korea and sent his first emissaries to the United States in the late 1950s. Growth was slow during the 1960s but picked up during the early 1970s, when Moon embarked on an evangelistic tour of the United States. His followers increased to about three thousand and soon garnered unfavorable press for their public recruitment drives at bus stations, airports, and university campuses. The church was labeled as a “brainwashing cult” that recruited naïve youth with techniques known as “heavenly deception.” Members of the Unification Church (UC) were among the first to experience coercive deprogramming, a method employed by concerned parents and cult deprogrammers that included kidnapping, removal to an isolated location, and the aggressive breaking down of a member's belief system.

High points of Moon's missionary efforts during the 1970s included his speech “The New Future of Christianity,” at the Madison Square Garden arena in 1974, and his addresses at Yankee Stadium in 1975 and the Washington Monument in 1976. One of his more successful outreaches was the inauguration of the International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences (ICUS), which annually gathered respected scientists from around the world to discuss how science and religion might work together for the good of humankind. The church taught that Western science and the UC's own religious views were wholly compatible. Moon's goal was to help scientists to focus their work on improving the physical life of humanity.

The UC's major theological statement is *Divine Principle,* a treatise that combines both philosophical inquiry and Christian biblical exegesis. The book focuses on the fall and subsequent atonement of humanity and interprets the Genesis narrative in ways that depart from conventional Christian teaching. For example, Moon teaches that Adam and Eve fell in paradise because of an unrighteous spiritual-sexual relationship between Satan and Eve, and then an unlawful physical-sexual act between Eve and Adam. From this act, the stain of sinfulness accrued to the couple's descendants. The redemption of humanity began with God's election of the perfect man, Jesus, to restore humankind to their Edenic state of spiritual innocence. By entering into a Trinity with God and the Holy Spirit, Jesus renewed the divine-human relationship and provided an example for humanity to follow. However, Moon taught that Jesus did not complete the final phase of his mission, which was to marry and produce a family of sinless children. He was thus only able to fulfill the spiritual phase of his mission, leaving the physical part of humanity under the dominion of Satan. Moon believes that it is his task as the messiah of the present age to complete the process begun by Jesus and to establish divine families in an earthly Kingdom of Heaven.

Moon founded the Professors World Peace Academy in 1973. This educational institution acquired a controlling interest in the University of Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1992. He also created the Unification Theologi-

cal Seminary in 1975 and established *The Washington Times,* a conservative daily newspaper, in 1983. The *Times* became the darling of many conservatives during the Reagan era and continues to be read by many members of the conservative movement in Washington, D.C. The UC maintained a fervently anticommunist stance during the Cold War but was able to cultivate high-level contacts within communist countries. For example, Moon was granted audiences with both North Korean Premier Kim Il Sung and former Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev during the early 1990s. With the fall of the former Soviet Union, Moon established federations for world peace around the world and held “sisterhood” ceremonies to promote harmonious relations between women from countries that had at one time been adversaries.

One of the more controversial initiatives by Moon was his sponsorship of International Holy Weddings, mass ceremonies that blessed both members and nonmembers who wished to rededicate their marriages and families to a godly life. Moon's interest in these rituals is rooted in his claim that he and his wife are the “True Parents” of all humanity and that his mission is to reestablish divine families on earth. Although Moon continues to spread his messianic message of world peace and holy families throughout the world, his church has never had broad appeal for U.S. citizens.

## Main Issues of Scholarly Research

The study of NRMs became an established academic subfield between 1960 and 2008. Scholars of NRMs have their own academic journals, such as *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions,* and the *Journal of Contemporary Religion.* Annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion feature regular paper sessions on NRMs, and academic organizations such as the Communal Studies Association, Center for the Study of New Religions, and American Family Foundation hold annual meetings that examine the many facets of scholarly research on NRMs. The bibliography of NRM studies continues to grow, and respected academic publishers have created series focused on the study of new religious phenomena across cultures.

Three main issues have stood out as the focus of attention for NRM scholars during the past half-century. These include research into (1) recruitment—who joins a NRM and why, and how NRMs recruit new members and foster their commitment and loyalty; (2) factors that allow for long-term movement success; and (3) NRMs as indicators of larger cultural trends.

## Recruitment Issues

Influenced by negative media reports and the anticult movement, the U.S. public has accepted a stereotyped profile of the people who join NRMs. Converts are viewed as young, gullible, and idealistic—making them susceptible to the charismatic persuasions of cult leaders—or they are seen as maladjusted adults who have failed at conventional life and are seeking a utopian escape from personal responsibility. Academic research

during the past forty years suggests that the actual profile of NRM recruits is far more complex and nuanced than this stereotype. This research can be summed up in six generalizations:

Members of NRMs are usually recruited by people they already know and trust—family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. The anticult movement had claimed that NRM recruits made their initial contact with cult members in public places such as airports, bus stations, and parks. Scholarly research indicates that most recruits were only willing to attend a NRM class or service because they were invited to do so by someone they already trusted.

Recruits to NRMs are often more interested in the emotional closeness that a group offers than in the group's ideology or formal teachings. This does not mean that the new religious vision of the group is unimportant, just that the real indicator of member loyalty is the emotional fulfillment recruits experience in the community. In the Holy Order of MANS (a prominent New Age group founded in the 1960s in San Francisco), for example, many members remained loyal to the group even when the teachings of the deceased founder were jettisoned and the community embraced the rituals and beliefs of Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

The age profile of recruits depends on the group being considered; many recruits to the NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s were in their late teens and early twenties. But groups such as Scientology, Eckankar, Wicca, the Rajneeshees, and Soka Gakkai attracted members in their thirties and forties, and other groups whose members joined when they were young now have a large proportion of members between forty and sixty.

Recruits to NRMs tend to have a higher educational profile than a random sample of the general public. In some instances, such as Buddhist meditation groups and Soka Gakkai, surveys indicated that between 60 and 80 percent of the members had completed at least some college, and many held baccalaureate or advanced degrees. One explanation for this finding is that the teachings of many NRMs are sophisticated and complex. To grasp the teachings a person needs the abilities that make for success in higher education—the ability to read in depth, to persevere when confronted with new concepts and ideas, and a generally literate intelligence.

Although some NRMs seem to recruit a higher percentage of women than men—examples include Christian Science in the 1920s, Soka Gakkai, the Rajneesh movement, and Wicca—on the whole the evidence suggests that women are no more likely to join a NRM than are men, and some groups, including Scientology and the Raelians, have a higher percentage of male members. Moreover, a group's gender profile can change over time. For example, ISKCON recruited far more men than women in its early years in the United States, but over time began to attract a larger number of women devotees.

Research indicates that the claims of the anti-cult movement—that people are drawn into NRMs using subliminal “brainwashing” techniques—are inaccurate. Rather, recruits make conscious, rational decisions to join a movement based on their perception of tangible rewards. Among these perceived rewards are (a) a heightened self-esteem and sense of purpose; (b) a new spiritual family that in many cases offers more love and support than the recruit's natural family; (c) esoteric knowledge that promises spiritual enlightenment, self-empowerment, and the secret of the future; (d) new career opportunities; (e) the provision of basic material needs for food, shelter, and health care; and (f) compelling spiritual experiences not available to nonmembers. To the extent that potential recruits find these rewards desirable and have difficulty finding them in conventional society, they may be drawn to NRMs that offer them.

## Factors Necessary to Long-Term Success in NRMs

Sociologist Rodney Stark has studied the factors that are necessary to long-term success for NRMs. He has postulated certain conditions that must be met for a movement to grow and achieve a significant degree of cultural influence. The first of these conditions he terms *cultural continuity.* NRMs must not diverge too far from the conventional faiths in the surrounding culture, or they risk being labeled as deviant or dangerous. To cite one example of a group that successfully navigated this challenge, the Mormons accepted the Bible while adding new scripture, the Book of Mormon. The Bible was approved by the people and religious institutions of the surrounding culture and thus provided a bridge for potential converts to Mormonism.

The second of Stark's conditions is that a NRM must maintain a *medium level of tension* with the surrounding culture. Put another way, the NRM must have elements of familiarity (so as not to appear too deviant), but it must also provide a counterbalancing number of unique features to ensure its competitiveness in the larger religious marketplace.

Stark's third condition stipulates that successful NRMs create strong organizations that clearly specify each member's role and contribution to the community. Part of a strong organization is a leadership hierarchy that is justified in the eyes of members on doctrinal or revelatory grounds and that lays out clear lines of authority.

Stark's fourth condition for movement success is the ability to attract and maintain a representative cross-section of ages and genders. Without young families, for example, religious communities are unable to ensure their continued growth through succeeding generations of children. Having members from the ranks of teens, young adults, middle-aged adults, and seniors makes the new community more appealing to potential recruits from these diverse age groups—many of whom are looking for age peers with whom to share interests and concerns.

Stark's fifth condition for movement success is the requirement that a group create a *dense but open social network.* In other words, successful movements foster a powerful sense of communal belonging while maintaining a sufficient degree of openness to the surrounding society, so the robust recruitment of new members can continue.

A final condition for movement success is the existence of a relatively unregulated religious economy, within which the group can freely pursue new members and create its own institutions. To a certain extent, the conventional religious communities in this economy must be weak, diffuse, and tolerant of diversity. This allows new competitors to emerge and flourish, to the degree that they fulfill the first five of Stark's conditions. When the religious ecology of a society shifts, however, as occurred in the late 1970s in the United States following the Peoples Temple events, the openness and tolerance for NRMs can be severely curtailed, making the survival of new groups much more problematic. The importance of Stark's factors for movement success can be seen in the rather small number of NRMs that ever attain any cultural influence or prominence over time. It is extremely challenging for a movement to achieve success in each of the areas indicated in Stark's model. Moreover, the final factor, a favorable ecology and relatively unregulated religious economy, is largely out of any individual group's control.

# NRMs as Barometers of Societal Change and Forces of Innovation

The study of NRMs has provided evidence that these groups can serve as barometers of socio-religious change in U.S. culture. Put another way, the study of NRMs uncovers the major tensions and problems that are currently at work in the wider society. The specific teachings and practices of a NRM are often designed to address these problem areas in the lives of its members. The founders of NRMs are not simply shifty charlatans out for material gain and self-aggrandizement. Many are highly sensitive and sincere men and women who are looking to advance serious solutions to societal ills. To take a few examples, when a new religious community such as Church Universal and Triumphant creates a private school based on Montessori and other alternative educational philosophies, it is responding to a very real need for educational reform in the U.S. public school system. When a group such as the Peoples Temple provides retirement facilities for the elderly, it is responding to the difficulties low-income seniors have in finding affordable housing and medical care. Whether one agrees with such practices or not, observers of U.S. religion can gain a greater understanding of the problem areas in the larger culture from a study of these groups.

NRMS can also be significant forces of innovation in the larger U.S. cultural milieu. In a sense, they can be viewed as subcultural petri dishes, where experiments with creative solutions to larger social and religious problems can be tried. When the experiments prove successful, the larger culture can adopt these solutions, and the processes of societal transformation and renewal can be sustained. The solutions proffered by these groups range from innovative ways to structure communities and neighborhoods, to new ways to educate children, live in ecologically sustainable environments, grow and process foods, heal the sick, and integrate spiritual practices into everyday life.

An example of this is the Holy Order of MANS, which sought to address the crisis of homeless women and children on the streets of San Francisco during the late 1960s. With the establishment of Raphael Houses in such cities as San Francisco, St. Louis, and Portland, Oregon, the order pioneered some of the first U.S. confidential shelters for victims of domestic abuse. This innovative solution to the problem of domestic violence has been adopted by the wider culture, with the result that today most medium-to-large-size cities in the United States have confidential shelters for victims of domestic violence.

# Conclusion

The study of NRMs is essential to understanding the complex U.S. religious history. Along with the establishment of the Protestant hegemony in the 1800s and the rise of evangelicalism and fundamentalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the stories of U.S. NRMs constitute the very marrow of the U.S. religious saga. Whereas earlier generations of U.S. religious historians (with the notable exceptions of Sidney E. Mead and Sydney E. Ahlstrom) had largely ignored (or dismissed) sect and cult movements in favor of narratives of Protestant exceptionalism, religion scholars since the 1960s, influenced by postmodern and postcolonial studies, began to pay more attention to the contentions for recognition and status by the diverse U.S. religious communities. In this context, a new generation of both historians and sociologists has produced more focused studies of new U.S. religious communities and has crafted surveys of U.S. religion that include

prominent sections on NRMs and other forms of alternative religious activity. The works of Catherine L. Albanese, Robert Ellwood, R. Laurence Moore, and Peter Williams have been exemplary in this retelling of the rich religious history in the United States. When the stories of NRMs are erased from U.S. religious history, a distorted picture emerges that glosses over the long history of religious innovation that has occurred in the United States. With the assistance of a new generation of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, a more accurate account is emerging that does justice to the pluralism that has been the dominant trait of U.S. religion since its founding as a nation. Innovative religious communities will continue to seek creative solutions to pressing U.S. social and religious challenges, even as they sometimes initiate tragic episodes of collective extremism and violence.

**See also***African American Religion: From the Civil War to Civil Rights; Economics; Esoteric Movements; Harmonialism and Metaphysical Religion; Hinduism in North America; Jehovah's Witnesses; Krishna Consciousness; Latter-day Saints; Native American Religions: Contemporary; Neo-Paganism; New Age Religion(s)*; *Occult and Metaphysical Religion; Pluralism; Religious Prejudice: Anti-Cult; Spirituality: Contemporary Trends; Unification Church; Wicca and Witchcraft*.

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- moon
- Peoples Temple
- cults
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- Divine Light Mission
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- new religious movements

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