Encyclopedia of Religion in America

New Religious Movements

Contributors: Edited by: Charles H. Lippy & Peter W. Williams
Edited by: Charles H. Lippy & Peter W. Williams
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New religious movements (NRMs) is the category that scholars use today to describe new, alternative, or nonmainstream religious groups. Earlier generations of scholars used other categories to understand new religions, beginning with the church-sect typology proposed by the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) and expanded by Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and others. The typologies that these intellectuals developed plotted religious groups on a continuum from established or mainstream "churches" to denominations, sects, and cults. Churches were mainstream religions allied with and supported by the state. They claimed universality and tried to establish religious monopolies. Denominations were churchlike groups that, while remaining on good terms with the state, were not officially supported by it. Denominations competed against each other for converts in societies that lacked officially established religions. Sects were reform groups that emerged within and were often critical of churches or denominations. Finally, cults existed in the greatest tension with the mainstream, were the most radical and innovative, and often were led by authoritarian leaders who attracted adherents from alienated or marginal classes. Both cults and sects could (but did not always) develop into denominations as they attracted followers. As they did so, they often muted criticisms of the mainstream; gave up strategies of separation; suppressed esoteric theological ideas; and developed more routinized, bureaucratic modes of organization.

This older typology was useful in helping intellectuals think about relationships between religious groups and social structures and norms. A number of sociologists in the second half of the twentieth century, however, have criticized this typology and suggested other ways of thinking about religious groups. The category *cult* in particular lost its appeal, in part because lay Americans were using it to categorize certain religions as illegitimate or dangerous. Because the term had these pejorative connotations, scholars in the 1960s replaced it with *new religious movements*. But this term also had its problems. Though scholars had for decades assembled lists of features shared by new religious movements, such as millennial beliefs, authoritarian leaders, and withdrawal from the mainstream, it was no longer clear that new religions shared these characteristics. Many so-called NRMs did not have charismatic leaders or unusual beliefs and social practices; some included under the moniker were not even "new." (In any case, it is difficult to define *newness*.) The category often used today is "new and alternative religions," and the focus for sociologists and historians increasingly is how each group is related to its particular historical and cultural context. In a recent article, Gordon Melton (2004) made the case for this turn to particular contexts by insisting that understanding these groups was possible only by understanding how each new religion is linked to its parent religion and to the social and cultural forces that shape it. Perhaps, he wrote, new religions share more with their parent religions than with other so-called new religions. Using this definition, we are drawn to how each new or alternative religion represents a departure from (and sometimes a critique of) mainstream culture and the ways that it develops out of mainstream culture.

Early Nineteenth-Century Apocalyptic Groups

Though there were innovative Christian groups in early America, the nineteenth century brought with it new discourses on freedom and egalitarianism and a resulting religious creativity that was unprecedented. Innumerable religious groups formed in this period, especially on the rough-and-tumble western frontier, where Americans forged a new spirit of individualism and independence from clergy in their distance from established religious institutions on the East Coast. Areas in central and western New York State were particularly well known for religious experimentation. The area was covered by intense evangelical revivals that sometimes led earnest religious seekers to more radical interpretations of God's will or his punishing wrath. Many new groups were apocalyptic, believing that the end of the world, or its radical re-creation, was immi-

nent. Revival excitements and several personal misfortunes appear to have transformed Robert Matthews (1778–1841), for example, into the messiah Matthias, a lonesome voice crying out against all the devils and delusions that dominated American Christianity. The real church had been lost. His attempt to return America to a biblical, patriarchal society ended when he was convicted for committing violence against family members and women and when the press, making the trial into a national scandal, made widely known rumors about his eccentricities, sexual improprieties, and violent behavior. His household did not, it turned out, look like the Kingdom of God on earth.

Other prophets felt similarly called to cry out to American believers, and one, the Baptist William Miller, predicted that the world would end in 1843. Miller had more success than Matthias, convincing a large number of American Christians in the 1830s and 1840s that Christ's Second Advent was fast approaching. By the early 1840s there was an entire movement, with Adventist lectures, newspapers, revival meetings, hymnals, and conferences. As the 1843 date approached, the movement continued its astonishing growth (abetted by widespread newspaper coverage), and thousands gathered at camp meetings and tabernacles built to accommodate large audiences. Many watched for providential signs. A remarkable and unexpected comet on February 28, 1843, just before Miller's anticipated March 21 deadline, was another sign for those who had eyes to see such things. The Adventists were disappointed when March 21 came and went, and the popular press issued an onslaught of ridicule, but Miller and others recalculated the numbers and set new dates for 1844. Those dates also came and passed. Many left the movement, but others, convinced that Christ would come again and buttressed in this belief by confirming visions and dreams, soldiered on.

One was Ellen White, who with several associates came to believe that Christ had returned in 1844—though his return, White said, was not to earth but to heaven. White had several other visions that filled out a distinctive Christian set of doctrines concerning health and healing practices, ritual life, and Sabbath observance. This was the beginning of Seventh-day Adventism. Another modern American denomination that emerged out of nineteenth-century Adventism was the Jehovah's Witnesses, a group that continued to set dates for the second coming on into the early twentieth century. The Jehovah's Witnesses also have a set of distinctive doctrines and practices. These include a robust belief in the power of the devil; a sense that the devil controls all humanly created governments; a refusal to salute flags or sing nationalistic songs; an avoidance of holidays such as Christmas and Easter (which they regard as pagan in origin); and active, often door-to-door, missionary activities.

A final apocalyptic group was the Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, a group that also developed out of the evangelical ferment in frontier New York. The founder Joseph Smith (1805–1844) was raised in upstate New York, and like others who lived among the fissiparous evangelical sects of this period, he could not figure out which confession, creed, or practice was the right one. A set of visions and revelations made it clear that none of them were true, that the authentic Christian church had been wholly lost, and that his providential mission involved restoring the church in anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ. He had a number of radical ideas: that God had a body and resided in a physical location somewhere in the universe, that spiritually advanced human beings could become gods, that a patriarchal society should be restored, that the Israelite priesthood and temple rituals should be restored, and that secular and sacred orders should be collapsed into a theocracy. To advance the cause of creating this theocracy (or “theodemocracy,” as Smith called it), he announced in 1844 his candidacy for the American presidency. Though Mormon ideas were unusual, it is not usually ideas that get new American religions into trouble. It is practices. In Smith's case, the practices that offend-

ed the most were his antidemocratic political philosophy and, probably more important, his endorsement of polygamy. Smith was killed by an angry mob in 1844. U.S. government officials pursued the Mormons west, and finally the group capitulated to legal and military pressures by renouncing polygamy in 1890. Since that time they have traveled a path similar to other new religions, becoming less prophetic and radical, modifying some of their offensive teachings, and developing a powerful public relations arm that stresses similarities with mainstream America.

Nineteenth-Century Communitarians

In addition to the apocalyptic groups, other radical religions were born in the early nineteenth century, including communitarian groups, groups that lived communally and experimented with ways of organizing society and especially the family. Many of them, like the Shakers, incorporated apocalyptic ideas, though the focus often was less on the end of time and more on achieving perfection here on earth. One of the most successful of these groups was the Shakers, a communally organized celibate group that reconstituted the Christian community into a family. Elders and eldresses were like parents to the community; all others were brothers and sisters. Everyone renounced sexual activity, and men and women were separated. All believers gave up private property. In the 1830s and 1840s Shakers experienced a time of spiritual visions and dreams, and they reported other charismatic gifts as well, such as speaking in tongues. Their worship practices incorporated marching, dancing, singing, and shouting, though in time these spontaneous forms of worship were routinized into more structured and orderly dances. This group appealed to many earnest evangelicals seeking more complete ways of consecrating their lives to Christianity. Shakers gained adherents by converting adults and adopting orphaned children.

A number of other communitarians responded to God's call to perfect their lives in every way. One of them, John Humphrey Noyes (1811–1886), an iconoclastic minister trained at Andover Seminary and Yale Divinity School, became preoccupied with the idea of total perfection and started a community of seven or eight families in Putney, Vermont. Gradually his ideas became more radical. In 1846 he and his followers initiated something they called “complex marriage,” an arrangement by which members of the community swapped sexual partners in order to overcome the selfishness of monogamous marriage. Noyes fled Putney when charged with adultery in 1847 and relocated to Oneida, in central New York, where he continued his pursuit of personal and social perfection, and where he came to believe that he had been divinely appointed to establish the kingdom of God on earth. He continued to hone his ideas about perfection in marriage, requiring for instance that during sex men abstain from ejaculation. In theory at least, the point of complex marriage was to increase love, not sexual pleasure (or number of children). In the late 1860s and 1870s new paths to evolutionary perfection were charted, and Noyes selected certain community members to reproduce. The children born of these unions, called stirps, were educated by a special committee. In 1879 local religious leaders stepped up their campaign against these practices, and amidst rumors of arrest for unorthodox sexual arrangements, Noyes fled to Canada, never to return to Oneida. Again, Americans are a tolerant people when it comes to ideas, but practices are another matter altogether.

There were other fervent communitarians, liberal and evangelical, in this period, and many of them had high hopes that their new kingdoms might usher in a more just millennium. These hopes had religious dimensions,

as we have seen; they also had socialist ones, for many drew deeply from socialist ideas in this period, especially those of the French utopian philosopher Charles Fourier (1772–1837). The result was a powerful communitarian impulse destructive of older social hierarchies, and many groups, religious and nonreligious, set out to subvert traditional American notions about sex, gender, and marriage. Besides Noyes's groups, others included the communities inspired by Welsh social reformer Robert Owen (1771–1858). Many of them expanded the range of things women could do, say, and preach in public.

Nineteenth-Century Healing Movements

The nineteenth century also saw the rise of an astonishing variety of dietary and body reform movements that linked body control, bodily health, and personal holiness. Starting in the 1830s, religious physiologists and reformers such as William Alcott (1798–1859) and Sylvester Graham (1794–1851) promoted dietary and health reform as a part of a comprehensive plan for physical and spiritual regeneration. These programs of reforming body and spirit had different aspects, including general dietary restraint, the use of whole foods, a vegetarian diet, routine exercise, and moderation in sexual relations. Graham, for one, drew on medical and neurological notions about the problems of overstimulating the self, and he recommended abstaining from anything that would irritate the body and the nervous system, including meat, alcohol, tea, coffee, and sex. Sexual relations—had to be carefully monitored; indulging once a month was acceptable, though for older couples it could be less frequent. Excessive sex, animal products, spicy foods, or stimulating drinks caused unnatural fevers and excitations, leading naturally to malaise or debility. Tight-laced dresses for women also were unnatural. Always, bodily conditions had spiritual repercussions. For instance, in 1835 and 1836, Alcott insisted that eating too much on the Sabbath led to sleepiness in church and obliviousness to the divine truths preached there.

Even Christians who didn't consider themselves physiologists picked up these emphases. For example, the great revivalist Charles Finney felt sorry for those who indulged in an overstimulating diet, one that turned their bodies into a fierce source of temptation. Many linked diet to salvation: in the 1830s and 1940s temperance hotels and boarding houses emerged offering Graham's diet; colleges instituted dietary requirements; perfectionist communes with vegetarian menus were organized; new religions, including the Mormons and the Seventh-day Adventists, sprang up with strict rules about eating and drinking. Ellen Gould White (1827–1915), the already-mentioned prophetess of Seventh-day Adventism, believed vegetarianism was a key way to overcome original sin and usher in the millennium.

It was not far from these reflections on diet to an emerging discourse on religion, health, and healing, one that became quite pervasive by the second half of the nineteenth century among both evangelicals and more liberal Christians. On the liberal side, an influential stream of new mental-healing movements grouped together under the category “New Thought” argued that spirit shaped matter and that, therefore, the wrong ways of thinking or believing caused physiological imbalance or sickness. Health could be achieved by right thinking. New Thought practitioners spanned a range, from those who ignored the body because they believed it was epiphenomenal to those who recognized its power to shape in reciprocal ways the spiritual self.

In the former category was the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), who thought that matter was an illusion best ignored. Hygienists, Grahamists, and other body reformers, Eddy thought, were starting at the wrong end of the process: they should pay attention not to the body's states but to the mind's. That was the source of all healing and illness. But Eddy was more certain than others that matter was unreal. Though many agreed that spirit/thought determined bodily conditions, they also pointed out that certain bodily practices helped spiritual processes along, including diet restrictions such as those advocated by earlier health reformers such as Graham and Alcott. The body had at least a shadow reality—and what we did with it influenced the spiritual self within. For these reasons, many New Thought reformers were interested in what and how to eat, how to exercise, and, for some, how (and when) to have sex. Of course, in the twentieth century, slim female bodies and strong male ones continued to be associated with vitality, intelligence, morality, and even advanced spiritual states (Griffith, 2004), so the impulse continues today.

Foreign Religions in America

Another source for innovative religious movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was religious notions coming from other countries. Buddhist and Hindu ideas undergirded transcendentalist ideas earlier in the century. Later as Eastern religious notions were popularized in English translations, books, and the periodical literature, new movements, such as the Theosophical Society, which was organized in New York in 1875, emerged to promote the study of world religions and, more importantly, the development of the mystical potentials that were latent in all human beings. Theosophists believed that all religions contained important wisdom. Their syncretic belief system incorporated key Eastern concepts such as karma and reincarnation to understand how the immortal human consciousness progressed through eternity.

A key event that stimulated East-West interchange and new American religious possibilities was the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a meeting that brought to America several important Hindu and Buddhist teachers. One of them was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who impressed many Americans at the Parliament and in subsequent lectures at different locations in the United States. Vivekanada introduced many Americans to yoga and Hinduism and, through the Vedanta Society that he founded in 1896, attracted the attention of a large number of liberal Protestants and religious seekers, some of whom were eager to support him financially. Vivekanada espoused a Hindu theology that each person could attain a realization of God through meditation and other worship practices, and he insisted that the different world religions were different paths to the same goal. He directed much of his attention to teaching Americans meditative techniques—focusing the mind, controlling the breath, performing certain bodily postures. But it was an Indian spiritual leader who became famous several decades later, Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), who made the Hindu religion an appealing option the world over and especially in America and other Christian countries. The power of Gandhi's spiritual disciplines was evident to many.

Also at the 1893 World's Parliament was the Buddhist monk Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), who, like Vivekananda, toured America and offered instruction on breathing, the postures and practices of meditation, and cultivating attitudes of tolerance and peace. Dharmapala was a pioneer in the Indian revival of Buddhism and a powerful Buddhist missionary to America and Europe. Of course he was not the only person bringing Buddhism to America. It had come much earlier in the century with Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the

West Coast starting in the 1840s, and a number of other monks and teachers brought it to the 1893 Parliament and promoted it in different forms in twentieth-century America. With Vivekananda and other Eastern teachers, Dharmapala gave lectures at the cosmopolitan Maine religious retreat center, Greenacre, at the turn of the twentieth century, where Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Bahá‘í, and American religious figures meditated together, exchanged ideas, and celebrated the divinity in everyone.

The Bahá‘í faith, born in nineteenth-century Iran, also had its American origins in this period, specifically at the Greenacre retreat center in Eliot, Maine, where its founder, Sarah Farmer, included Bahá‘í teachers in the curriculum and converted to the religion herself in 1900. The faith began when Mirza Husayn Ali (1817–1892) assumed the title Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic: “Glory of God”) and claimed to be the divine messenger—a claim that in nineteenth-century Iran was viewed quite seriously and could result in imprisonment or death to the person making the claim. Bahá'u'lláh, though incarcerated and tortured, was exiled rather than killed. He traveled from Iran to Iraq, Turkey, and finally Ottoman Palestine in 1868, where he resided until he died in 1892. Starting in 1892 several Middle Eastern Bahá‘í missionaries and teachers came to America, converting about 1,500 Americans of evangelical and liberal Protestant background before 1899. Many saw this faith as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies about the end-times; some could conjure memories of great millennial disappointments at midcentury and see Bahá'u'lláh's mission as a sign that they had been right all along. For these believers, there was no disappointment after all.

Some Americans, learning from Eastern teachers about this great new day of God, wished to journey themselves to the Holy Land, to Ottoman Palestine, and those with means did so, including Sarah Farmer in 1900. When Farmer came back, she was convinced that she had found a new divine message of ecumenism that might unite all the different believers of the world, and she tilted her Greenacre retreat center towards an explicitly Bahá‘í identity. In twentieth-century America, the Bahá‘í community continued to attract religious liberals, though its appeal expanded to more conservative Christians, especially in the South, and other kinds of Americans.

How did mainstream—that is, Protestant—Americans respond to the new religious diversity coming in the wake of the 1893 Parliament? It is worth saying first of all that in 1900 Protestants still were by far the majority faith, representing a full 70 percent of the American population (an additional 20 percent were Catholic). Basically there were three kinds of Protestant responses to religious diversity: conservative, moderate, and liberal. Conservatives then, like conservatives now, believed that Christianity was the only way to salvation; they either boycotted the 1893 Parliament or were on the scene to win others for Christ. Liberal Protestants, a small but highly articulate minority, on the whole accepted as true and even beautiful non-Christian religions. Many liberals believed that all the great religions helped develop the human soul. Moderate Protestants, by far the majority (then and now), believed that Christianity was the best faith but not the only one; other religions contained truth. Arguments among Christians about these questions had practical implications for interreligious attitudes at home and missionary ideology abroad. There was an active twentieth-century debate among Christians, one that is ongoing, about how to understand non-Christian religions and teach their followers about Christ.

Early Twentieth-Century Developments

By the early twentieth century America had industrialized and urbanized, and both older, established religions and new movements emerged to help Americans make sense of these changes. American Christians developed new, social forms of Christianity and new forms of activism intended to bring Christ's message to immigrants and the urban poor. There were Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish forms of social religion. The African American community, in the midst of a “great migration” from the rural South to the urban North in the period 1890–1930, also developed innovative new religions that combined elements of more traditional religions (African religions and Christianity, for instance) with newer emphases on economic independence, identity, and peoplehood. Strong black nationalist movements emerged, many of them drawing on Jewish or Muslim religious images, which they used to reject vociferously American Christianity and its legacy of oppression. Beginning in the 1890s, several groups of black Jews emerged that had Jewish ideas and practices and linked the African American community to the lost tribes of Israel. Some of these groups had very specific racial eschatologies: the temporary rule of white people would end in an imminent catastrophe, and the true Israelites, Africans, would emerge as powerful and wealthy.

Black Muslim groups also emerged in this period. A number of reformers, including Noble Drew Ali (1886–1929), initiated black Muslim movements in the early decades of the century. Ali insisted that Africans in America were descended from the Moors who had settled in the northern and western shores of Africa. He also believed that the king of Morocco had commissioned him to teach Islam to black Americans. An early book, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America,* combined Christian, Muslim, and nationalist emphases. Ali drew on some of the ideas of Marcus Garvey's nationalist movement, which Garvey began in 1914 and which had a more Christian-oriented set of symbols and practices.

When Garvey was imprisoned for mail fraud in 1925, Ali's group, the Moorish Science Temple, successfully recruited many of his followers. Some scholars maintain that one of Ali's associates was W. D. Fard, an itinerant preacher of black nationalism and Islam and a peddler of silks and other products in Detroit early in the 1930s. When Fard disappeared in 1934, Elijah Muhammad led the burgeoning group and moved the headquarters to Chicago, where he helped organize new Nation of Islam temples, schools, housing projects, and businesses. Elijah Muhammad's theology was distinctive. He elevated Fard to Allah (God) incarnate and spoke of himself as a new messenger of Allah. He developed the racial theology created by earlier groups into a way of explaining American racism and justifying racial separation. In his theology blacks were the original human beings, and whites were a cosmogonic mistake, a weaker, paler human type created by an evil scientist named Yakub. Whites were given a specific period of time to rule, and blacks, while waiting for the world to be turned upside down, should prepare for an eventual takeover. They did so by following a strict regimen: avoiding worldly pleasures, alcohol, tobacco, dancing, gambling, and premarital sex. The Nation of Islam called for the separation of the races and for some kind of official redress because of centuries of slavery. This new religion was a powerful and appealing alternative to many African Americans seeking a more satisfactory way of understanding identity, purpose, and the meaning of being African in America.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the Nation of Islam edged closer to orthodox Islam. One crucial lieutenant of Elijah Muhammad whose story is well known, Malcolm X (1925–1965), made famous this journey from the Nation of Islam to orthodox Islam. Though he was assassinated by Nation of Islam gunmen in 1965, the move towards Islamic orthodoxy was unstoppable, and gradually Nation of Islam officials, including the son of Elijah Muhammad, Wallace Muhammad, dropped antiwhite rhetoric and embraced more orthodox Muslim positions. This took place in the 1970s and 1980s. By 1985, some of the old guard regretted

the move away from older Nation beliefs, and a group of men under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan reconstituted the older group.

Other movements also spoke powerfully to the problems of race and city living. Father Divine's Peace Mission, a very successful and wealthy movement from the 1920s to the 1940s, began when George Baker (1882–1965) claimed to be God and opened his Long Island home in the 1920s for worship services and extravagant banquets. Father Divine's racially integrated banquets demonstrated his power to feed people spiritually and physically. At first the gatherings were entirely African American, though it was only a matter of time before Divine's interracial message attracted mixed audiences. When the stock market crashed in 1929 and the Great Depression set in, Divine's generous free meals and worship services gained in popularity. In 1933 he moved his Peace Mission to Harlem, where his disciples lived communally in “heavens” separated by sex, pooling their income in a cooperative economic enterprise, which at its height incorporated three apartment houses, nine private houses, and fifteen to twenty flats. At its peak in the 1930s, the Peace Mission was the largest single real estate owner in Harlem. It also included twenty-five restaurants and many grocery stores, barber shops, and other businesses. As Americans focused on war and then contentment and prosperity in the 1950s, Father Divine's movement declined. The community's diminishing numbers were not helped by Divine's encouragements to practice celibacy.

The Religious Powers of the Mind

The rise of psychological explanations for human behavior in the late nineteenth century led to another development: the mind became a powerful religious metaphor. New religions and older ones discovered that the mind had a host of previously unknown powers, human and divine, that led to greater happiness, moments of transcendence, and general religious fulfillment. The first group of believers seeing in the mind the power to save and cure is a group that has already been mentioned, New Thought, a group that includes Christian Science, Divine Science, innumerable independent metaphysical churches, and the Unity School of Christianity. All of these groups espouse a kind of radical idealism that holds that the mind's beliefs and ideas are the only real things in the universe. The mind produces all other phenomena. In this formulation sin, sickness and other difficulties are produced by wrong ways of thinking, and salvation comes by holding in your mind the right thoughts and beliefs.

A good example of this religious style is illustrated by Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), the founder of Christian Science, who in 1866 cured what was apparently a crippling illness by realizing that, like the paralyzed man in the Bible healed by courage and faith (Matthew 9:2), she too could stand up and walk. What she realized in that moment and taught for the rest of her life was that the material world, a world with sickness and death, was an illusion produced by wrong thinking. Healing comes when believers learn to think correctly about reality, when they understand in particular God's complete goodness and realize that all reality, including human beings, are perfect reflections of this goodness.

A large number of other religious reformers agreed that the mind could heal or resolve sicknesses and per-

sonal difficulties. The best known of these New Thought teachers were Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889), Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849–1925), Ralph Waldo Trine (1866–1958), and Charles (1854–1948) and Myrtle (1845–1931) Fillmore, the founders of the Unity School of Christianity. Trine was probably the most popular, and his many books are still available at New Age and Christian bookstores. Trine insisted that coming to a deep realization of our oneness with God and opening ourselves to his in-flowing grace were the crucial religious tasks. His writings, like those of Eddy and other New Thought practitioners, borrowed Christian and psychological motifs. He talked at length about psychosomatic effects, and about how distorted mental and emotional conditions (such as, fear) produced illness. He insisted that meditations and affirmations and other ways of holding correct thoughts in mind healed mental and physical sicknesses. Many in this New Thought tradition believed that the mind had many layers, dimensions, and mysteries, and that somehow the unconscious was connected to a transcendent being or energy. This powerful and widespread notion in Christian and new religions beginning early in the twentieth century was popularized principally by the philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910), who believed he glimpsed evidence of a transcendent “More” in people's religious and psychical experiences, including trances, ecstatic worship experiences, sudden moments of ecstasy, and communications with the dead. James's influence penetrated almost every American religious group and culture.

Though their lineage is considerably more eclectic, incorporating ideas from Buddhism and Hinduism, Scientologists too believed in the explosive power of the mind, and they too shifted the religious emphasis from salvation to therapy and self-realization. (Of course, in an atmosphere in which the transcendent is located in the self, self-realization signals not the loss of salvation but its reformulation.) Scientology's founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), was more freewheeling than other believers in borrowing from psychological truths, for he did not merely harmonize psychological notions and Christian ones. Rather, he reworked the entire religious vocabulary with new categories that seemed one part psychology and one part science fiction: the eternal essence of each person became a Thetan, painful unconscious memories besetting individual Thetans were engrams, the therapeutic process of destroying engrams was auditing, and the biofeedback device used in these auditing sessions was a piece of equipment called an E-Meter. Scientology claimed to be both a science of mind and a religion, the Thetan was both soul and mind, and auditing was both worship and therapy—all examples of the powerful twentieth-century move towards psychologizing religion in America. The goal of Scientology's therapeutic process was ridding the self of engrams and the painful emotions and unhealthy, unconscious reactions they triggered, thus achieving a less inhibited, consciously chosen way of life.

Scientologists also have an elaborate cosmology with different spiritual levels that Thetans attempt to traverse with ongoing forms of auditing, training, and initiation. At the higher spiritual levels, esoteric elements of Hubbard's cosmology are revealed to initiates, including what are called “space opera” elements, essentially cosmological myths that detail how nefarious aliens intervened during crucial moments on ancient Earth. Scientology is a small group but has received disproportionate media attention because of several high-profile adherents and because it has been at the center of lawsuits challenging its status as a tax-exempt organization.

The “New Age”

Americans speak of “New Age” religion as if they know what it is, but in fact the category holds an incredibly diverse set of religious practices, including energy balancing, yoga, channeling, and Native American vision quests. Supplying a basic definition has not been easy for scholars, but in general New Age seems to incorporate (1) a millennial hope that this is a new age of spiritual possibilities, (2) a belief in immanent metaphysical energies and corresponding practices that attempt to harmonize the self with these energies, (3) a belief that harmonizing the self with these energies brings healing and spiritual development, and (4) a religious eclecticism in which believers borrow religious insights and practices from a range of traditions.

Central to New Age religions is a belief in an immanent, divine energy in all things. New Agers draw selectively from science to attempt to prove this point. The New Age celebrity Shirley MacLaine, for one, drew on a particular reading of quantum physics to show that the universe is comprised not of matter but of energies, fields, and information. In *Out on a Limb* she noted that all of us were therefore “God energy”—powerful, intelligent, creative, and in charge of our identities and destinies. Drawing on quantum physics, neuroscience, and Vedanta Hinduism, Deepak Chopra, an earnest former endocrinologist and best-selling New Age writer, has even offered instructions for navigating the “quantum” worlds of fluxing spiritual energies. He argues that the world was divided into three zones: material (matter), quantum (in-between), and virtual (pure spirit). Traveling in the quantum zone is spiritually unstable; most of us are able to glimpse it in intuitions and fleeting moments of bliss. But mystics and other expert “quantum navigators” have the skill to anchor themselves in this zone and feel its signs—sensations of weightlessness, heightened senses, a perception of energy in the body, seeing the “light.” Chopra's books, like those of other New Age gurus such as Wayne Dyer, draw eclectically on devotional practices, including Eastern forms of meditation and yoga, to create the kinds of focused intentions and imaginativeness that might keep aspirants always in this light. It is striking how often Chopra cites work and key figures in physics, psychology, and consciousness studies to create his religious vision.

The New Age tradition, like the New Thought tradition that preceded it, emphasizes that the mind's states determine all spiritual and material realities. It is the source of inner contentment and outer healing—and its effects can even go beyond the self. New Age believers insist that states of mind have even been shown to influence the properties of water and biological matter, such as DNA, even when it is held at a distance from meditators. New Agers are keenly interested in showing this to be true—that psychological forces reach outside of the self. If all matter really is mental energy, why not? Psychokinetic effects can be traced in different forms—precognition, telepathy, clairvoyance, healing, levitation, and homeopathy. All of these phenomena point to the elusive effects of subtle energies and the ways that the mind can move them in the world.

Communicating with departed spirits also is an important practice for some New Agers. The belief that the living can communicate with the dead is not a New Age invention, of course; in different forms it is present in many world religions, and in America it was notably present after the catastrophe of the Civil War, which killed an astonishing 620,000 Americans (out of a total population of 31 million), as well as after World War I. Many yearned for the dead, and a religious movement that offered rituals of communicating with them, Spiritualism, flourished. Modern-day mediums in the New Age network often practice their craft in the context of small Spiritualist churches or informal groups, and worship often can seem quite “Protestant,” with services that include prayer, singing, and a sermon. The distinctive part, however, is the séance, in which a pastor or medium will channel messages from the spirit world. It is hard to know how many Americans believe or participate in this kind of practice, though it is worth noting that in surveys in the 1990s, 69 percent of the U.S. population said they believed in “angels” and 25 percent said they believed in the possibility of talking with the dead (Brown,

1997). Books written by prominent mediums sell well. A number of television shows have featured mediums and psychics, such as the primetime drama *Medium,* as well as daytime talk shows such as *Crossing Over with John Edward.*

The 1960's Counterculture

The 1960s was a period of growth and diversification for new and alternative religions in America. This was so for several reasons. First, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 put an end to the restrictive immigration quotas initiated in the 1920s. An especially large number of immigrants from Asia and Southeast Asia came, bringing with them Buddhism, Taoism, and Asian varieties of Christianity. Second, the 1960s brought a decisive turn away from the celebratory mood of the post-War 1950s and a questioning of America's role in the world, especially its role in Vietnam. One result was an expanding uncertainty about American traditions that led some to revise older theologies and others to seek wholly new faiths. Third and finally, the civil rights movement, which drew strength from uncertainties about America's role in the world, forced American believers to rethink issues related to religion, race, and justice. In many cases painful adjustments had to be made. New liberation and black theologies emerged, and faiths that offered alternative visions of race, peace, and justice, such as the Bahá'í and Quaker faiths, had wide appeal. In general, it was an age of restatements, reformulations, and personal seeking, and in some ways this culture of seeking continues today, especially in the aging baby boomer generation and their children. Growth rates for new and alternative religions in the 1960s were remarkable. The Bahá'í faith, which claimed just 7,000 adherents in 1956, had approximately 60,000 by 1974. The Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, which had about 300 American members in 1960, ballooned to approximately 200,000 members by 1976. Many other new and alternative religions, including groups such as the Nation of Islam and American Hindu sects, also experienced dramatic growth in this period. (The 1970s and 1980s brought an inevitable contraction in some groups; Soka Gakkai, for instance, shrank to 50,000 by 1992).

The religious counterculture in the 1960s also opened up new possibilities for women in American society. Some of these possibilities became available within traditional confessions. In 1972 the Hebrew Union College ordained the first woman rabbi. Most of the mainline Protestant denominations ordained women by the 1970s. Those who were unable or unwilling to agitate for change within older denominations embarked on a variety of spiritual journeys in some cases producing critiques of Christianity and Judaism and devising new ways of believing. Mary Daly's evolving critique of Christianity propelled her from Catholicism to new forms of feminist spirituality. Her critique of Christianity—that the Church is anchored in irredeemably antiwoman language—is read in introductory theology courses across the globe. Daly's journey into a less patriarchal and more environmentally conscious spirituality has been repeated by many others, men and women, in the feminist spirituality movement, a diffuse but powerful impulse in American culture that attempts to recover pre-Christian religious beliefs, worship of female divinities, and practices that manipulate the spiritual energies in nature. The movement has always been eclectic, with individual participants drawing from goddess traditions of ancient Greece, pre-Christian Europe, and Native American religion. Feminist spirituality offers both a critique of and a new alternative to American Christianity.

Anti-Cult Agitation and Other Controversies

The radical impulses of the 1960s triggered a set of conservative reactions that opposed feminism, multiculturalism, the sexual revolution, gay rights, and other causes in the liberal cultural agenda. One part of this reaction was the anti-cult movement, which drew strength from this diffuse conservative movement and from several shocking tragedies associated with new religions, including most notably the mass suicide in 1978 in Jim Jones's Peoples Temple. Were new religions dangerous? Should the American people be protected from them? The anti-cult movement had developed before the Peoples Temple tragedy, begun early in the 1970s by concerned relatives of Americans who had joined controversial religious groups in the 1960s. The key problems identified by the anti-cult movement were religious coercion and "brainwashing." For anti-cult operators, rescuing cult members involved abducting, restraining, and deprogramming them. This was usually done by people without mental health credentials. By the late 1970s, however, the anti-cult movement was professionalized, and mental health practitioners assumed a higher profile in the movement. The movement developed professional journals and conferences, and coercive deprogramming was abandoned in favor of counseling. The anti-cult movement had some success in convincing the broader mental health profession (and the public) that conversion to new religions created psychological problems and illnesses.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s the anti-cult movement lost momentum for several reasons. First, after the 1960s and 1970s membership in new religions declined, and there were fewer angry parents and aggrieved ex-members. Second, very controversial groups, such as the Peoples Temple, either failed to grow, declined precipitously, or disappeared. Third, many other new religious movements, such as the Mormons, grew and became more mainstream, joining the list of accepted (or almost accepted) American churches (although many people from a variety of faiths still regard Mormons and other distinctive groups as dangerous "cults"). Fourth and finally, a number of sociologists of new religions, concerned that the anti-cult crusade was endangering cherished religious liberties, condemned the anti-cult movement and demonstrated convincingly that many of its claims—such as the notion that NRMs brainwashed converts—were without scientific basis.

It is perhaps on this final issue, the issue of brainwashing and coercion, that NRM commentators have disagreed most passionately. Those hoping to protect NRMs and religious liberties—that is, the majority of scholars—have insisted that brainwashing does not exist. They insist that medicalizing adherence to new religions—that talking of conversion processes only in terms of physical and mental pathologies—unfairly targets believers of the new religions and adds to the stigmatization of their groups. On the other hand, some insist that new religions manipulate their members, coercing them into joining or remaining members. Arguments on both sides have been acrimonious, in part because they play out not just in conferences and university classrooms but in courtrooms, where scholarly "experts" are paid to instruct judges and juries about the dangers, real or imagined, of new religions. These are crucial arguments, with a lot at stake. Should American citizens be protected from new religions? Should child members of new religions be forcibly removed? What is the role of the state in protecting personal autonomy? What is the role of the state in protecting the children of unconventional believers? How do we balance the potentially harmful effects of religious adherence with our national commitment to religious freedom? While these questions remain difficult to answer, it is certainly the case that asking and debating all of them has led to a remarkably developed literature on conversion and religious choice, with contributions from psychologists, sociologists, and historians.

Many Americans continue to look at new and alternative religions with skepticism, especially when these religions violate cultural norms or engage in unusual practices. Sources of tension between new religions and the mainstream are varied. Many groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, or Hare Krishna, are chary of

American popular culture and pursue various strategies of critique and separation. This can create tension. Other groups violate American norms concerning health and healing by refusing to treat illnesses with Western biomedicine. This has been the case, for example, with Christian Scientists, who have been sued repeatedly for refusing to treat children with deadly illnesses. This also has been an issue for immigrant groups such as the Hmong from Southeast Asia, a people whose beliefs about spirit, body, and health neither agree with Western biomedicine's underlying assumptions nor understand its healing practices. Some new religions may also seem inappropriately authoritarian to people in the American mainstream. New religions have charismatic leaders who may seem tyrannical. Their demands on adherents may leave believers without freedom and autonomy. This is a problematic argument, of course, for all religions demand obedience and sacrificial service and giving. What exactly, then, is the difference between a new and illegitimate religion and an older, established, legitimate one?

Though skepticism about new religions continues, a countertrend is also taking place, as religions and religious practices (such as yoga) that once seemed new or exotic are becoming mainstream. Rising interest in new religions and religious practices has been abetted by an emerging culture of religious openness, a culture not just of increased religious seeking but also of increasing interreligious curiosity among believers in established religious communities. It is no longer difficult to find committed Christians, Jews, or Muslims practicing yoga, learning something about Buddhist meditation, or reading the latest New Age self-help book. In many ways, as we have seen, America's particular history and culture, its ongoing preoccupation with liberty, individualism, and iconoclasm, made this twentieth-century religious openness possible. We have seen signs and hints of a burgeoning religious diversity and innovative spirit in earlier centuries, when new evangelical sects, idiosyncratic communes, and prophetic movements were born. There can be little doubt that these groups will continue to multiply and that American scholars and other observers will continue to wrestle with ways of evaluating and interpreting them appropriately.

See also*Adventism and Millennialism; Architecture: New Religious Movements; Bahá'í; Canada: Pluralism; Christian Science; Esoteric Movements; Harmonialism and Metaphysical Religion; Jehovah's Witnesses; Liberation Theology; New Age Religion(s); Occult and Metaphysical Religion; Pluralism; Religious Prejudice: Anti-Cult; Scientology; Spirituality: Contemporary Trends; Wicca and Witchcraft.*

Christopher G. White

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