Chapter Overview

This chapter explores religious movements that have emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fisher incisively observes that, All of the major religions we have examined were once new; thus there is an important connection between the preceding chapters and Chapter twelve. Moreover, Fisher’s point also expresses a significant implication: a religion one grows up within and/or those religions with which one becomes familiar in their lifetimes can be taken for granted as always being as they are now, or seen as the norm(s) because this is what one knows about, thereby rendering other unfamiliar religious paths as new or eccentric or heretical.

This chapter reminds us that the religions presented in previous chapters, when in their infancy met the same kind of mindset and frequent opposition from established religions. Family members of those who join new religious movements often disapprove of such membership. Fears and concerns regarding these new movements include: brainwashing, that this is a front for illegal business, an attempt to take money from gullible followers, a facade for promoting neo-fascist and white supremacist views, and the fear of psychological harm coming to young vulnerable members. Consequently, this chapter encourages the reader to approach new religious movements with an informed historical consciousness and sensitivity. It is always appropriate to treat other people and their beliefs with respect.

A multiplicity of new religious paths are covered in these pages and grouped under five major chapter headings: Apocalyptic expectations, Supernatural Powers and Revelations, Offshoots and Combinations of Older Religions, Nature Spirituality, and Universalist religions. These headings are not categories of new religions per se; rather, they identify weighty aspects shared by a number of religious groups under each heading.

A moment’s reflection on the word new in this chapter’s title is in order. The word new used as a description of what follows is imprecise as the chapter notes. Many of the groups examined in the following pages have a long history and have flourished well after the death of their first founder. Consequently, this word should not be taken in a strict or literal sense. Actually, the movements presented in the chapter are described as new to avoid the negative connotations aroused by the words cult or sect, as some might be tempted to label the following movements by such terms. New movements, though somewhat imprecise, is a neutral expression.

The goals of the chapter are these:
1. To survey some representative examples of new religious movements
2. To point out the links between new religious movements and traditionally established religions
3. To heighten one’s sensitivity to the living nature of the human phenomena called religion.

Potential conditions for longevity

An important question to pose to these new movements is, Which of them, if any, will continue beyond a few generations? The chapter offers five rather quantitative factors and two spiritual factors that may help indicate whether a religion will become widespread and long lasting. The first five factors can be stated as questions:

1. Is there a balance between similarities to existing beliefs and differences compelling enough to invite conversion to the new faith?

2. Will the organization, personal commitment, and bonds between followers of the faith survive the death of the founder and the first followers?
3. Are the times conducive to the recruitment of new members, are great social changes afoot, is the religion rooted in a place that allows freedom of religious choice, are relationships within society fragmenting?

4. Have institutionalized religions become void of living spirituality, are they essential institutions now, such that a new religious path is seen as vibrant and a viable alternative to the old?

Are children being born into and remaining within the new religion?

The first spiritual factor cited by the chapter can also be phrased as a question: Did the founder of the new religion, or the one who spread its message possess and pass on a genuine spirituality to followers such that new teachings and their presentation could capture people's hearts, convert their lives, and motivate them to act as a community? The second spiritual factor implicitly queries whether the new religion offers one communion with the divine or an alliance with absolute truth?

With such questions in mind, we now turn to five groups of new religious movements. Given the extensive details in this chapter and the number of new religious paths surveyed, what follows is simply suggestive, not exhaustive.

**1. Apocalyptic Expectations**

The adjective apocalyptic comes from the Greek word, apokalypsis, which means *an uncovering, a revelation*. In religious parlance, apocalyptic frequently refers to religious interpretations of the ultimate end of history as we know it, and the re-creation of the universe. This will bring a brand new beginning in which we will find none of the imperfections and ills currently a part of history. The end times is sometimes envisioned as a dramatic cataclysmic event involving direct action by the Sacred, sometimes even entailing Divine retribution for unbelievers or the evil and triumphant exaltation for the faithful. A concept related to apocalypticism in the Christian religion is that of millennialism. This expectation is expressed in the Biblical book called Revelation. Therein, at the great end of all time, a decisive battle between the force of good and evil is depicted. A horrendous war ensues between God and Satan with God winning in exalted splendor. There will then follow the Millennium; a thousand year period on earth when Jesus the Christ will rule over all with a peace that has never yet existed.

Expectations of major world changes can be found in Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, whereas established religions may harbor such expectations and be viewed as mainstream, traditional, and normal, other religious movements advocating apocalyptic expectations are frequently labeled as extremist. This can lead to two manifestations of such movements. On the one hand, to avoid detraction and derision, such a movement may become isolationist, withdrawing from the main body of society in order to prepare for the end time. Such was the case of the Branch Dividians in Waco Texas. On the other hand, such a movement may remain public, accept ridicule, and attempt to share their beliefs with mainstream society in an attempt to convert others before the end. Two examples of the latter are the Rastafarians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Rastafarianism is a Jamaican movement that has entertained millenarian expectations in the prophecies of Alexander Bedward (1895) and Marcus Garvey. In its vision, blacks have a special role in the coming new era. A distinct genre of music has arisen in connection with this movement, namely, reggae. Interestingly, women are not considered capable of Rastafarian awareness. The movement is not confined to Jamaica. It has spread to the Caribbean, North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Jehovah's Witnesses are another millenarian group. The movement is based on the Christian Bible and its vision of the millennial age is very much like the description in the book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament. The movement was founded in the nineteenth century by Charles Taze Russell. The movement's
magazine *The Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Presence* is presently published in 110 languages. Dedicated missionaries sell some fifteen million copies of each edition.

2. Supernatural Powers and Revelations

Many new religious spiritualities ground themselves in the realm that is beyond or above nature. Miki Nakayama, a nineteenth-century founder of the Tenrikyo movement is one such example. She claims to have been possessed by ten kami who proclaimed through her. It is said that she composed some 1711 poems under divine inspiration, which became this movement’s sacred scriptures.
The Mahikari movement was founded in 1959 by Sukui Nushi Sama in Japan. He believes he is the successor to Buddha and Christ as God’s viceroy on earth. Mahikirians are taught that science and medicine are ignorant superstitions. Rather than use such measures, they are further taught to transmit light for healing, bringing peace to ancestral spirits, and for spreading divine civilization throughout the world.

Santeria is a tradition which stresses contact and cooperation with the spirits. The name literally means the way of the saints. It is a mixture of Catholic and African traditions in the Caribbean and Latin America. Voodoo developed in Haiti. The name means spirit. It is a blending of French Catholic and West African teachings. In these traditions specialists use magical techniques to help people solve their problems, find a spouse, get jobs, etc.

Spiritualism refers to a United States Christian context in which communication with the spirits of the dead is emphasized. The National Spiritualist Association of Churches defines Spiritualism as, The science, philosophy, and religion of continuous life. Its liturgy has similarities with Christian worship; however, it does not focus on sinfulness or Jesus. This tradition includes mediums who commune with the dead on behalf of the living. It also includes a version of karma. The Theosophical Society was founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky in the nineteenth century. Followers of this group feel they are recipients of revelations from unseen spiritual powers. Theosophy means divine wisdom. According to this movement’s founder, there is no religion higher than truth. This path is an attempt to reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities. The Theosophical Society has members in seventy countries today. Some groups have branched off from it, and one of these is The Church Universal and Triumphant.

3. Offshoots and Combinations of Older Religions

Syncretism refers to the combination of usually differing beliefs drawn from different traditions, that is to say, a mixture of more than one religion embodied in one tradition. Religious movements, which exhibit this characteristic, can be called syncretistic.

Mary Baker Eddy founded the Church of Christian Science in the later nineteenth century. Two major beliefs make this movement distinct. First, it is Bible centered, although the Bible can only be properly interpreted by using the commentary of Mary Baker Eddy. Second, it retains the conviction that human sinfulness stands between people and God. It is part of the religious practice of this group to refuse medical treatment and rely on faith healing. This group publishes and internationally renowned paper, The Christian Science Monitor.

As an outgrowth of Sikhism in India, the leaders of the Radhasoami movement often have Sikh backgrounds. Whereas orthodox Sikhs believe in a succession of ten gurus, Radhasoamis believe in an ongoing succession of living masters. Today this movement has branched into thirty groups, each with its own guru. The Punjabi branches are known as Sant Mat, a collective term meaning Path of the Masters. Intriguingly, this movement is described as an esoteric path without esoteric ceremonies. This form of spirituality now claims one point seven million initiates.

The Unification Church (their nickname is the Moonies) whose members prefer to be called Unificationists, was founded by Sun Myung Moon. He studied Confucianism as a boy, but his parents converted to Christianity and so did he. He even became a Sunday School teacher. Moon claims that on Easter 1935 Jesus appeared to him in a vision. According to Moon, Jesus asked him to complete his work of establishing the kingdom of God on earth. He considers himself and his spouse to be collectively the Messiah. Today, there are approximately 100,000 Unification Church members throughout the world.

4. Nature spirituality

This is a kind of global religion insofar as it seeks to reconnect or tie people back to spirituality through a renewed reverence for and relationship with nature. Neo-Paganism attempts to practice a nature-oriented spirituality by recovering past models of religion long since suppressed by more powerful religions. Some may call their path Witchcraft (Wicca).
Deep Ecology refers to a movement that stresses the experience of believers as oneness or being one with all the natural world, indeed, even the cosmos. New Age planetary consciousness is a movement that advocates belief in the evolution of consciousness. In fact, this movement contends that the entire planet and all its interrelationships are becoming one conscious interactive being.

5. Universalist religions

This describes the attempt to harmonize the world’s religions and traditions belonging to it while emphasizing the theme and goal of religious unity as their major focus. Universal Worship refers to liturgies presided over by western ministers trained by the Sufi Order. During such worship, scriptures of all major religions including the Divine Feminine Principle and those of indigenous religions are placed next to each other on an altar. A candle is lighted reverencing each tradition and symbolizing the common source of all life and religion. Participants share meditations, stories, songs, and readings from all religions on a specific theme, e.g., the idea of spiritual sacrifice. The chapter does not use this terminology, but universalist religions represent a global attempt at ecumenism. A new religion intent on uniting all of humanity in the belief in one God is Baha’i. Foreshadowed in Persia, it was originally proclaimed in a Muslim state. Today, Baha’i has spread to two hundred and thirty three countries and territories around the world and claims five million followers. They have scriptures but no priesthood. They proclaim Baha’u’llah as a great prophet in the line of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Zarathustra, Krishna, and Buddha. All of these figures are professed as messengers and revealers of God’s will. Baha is believe that each successive messenger proclaims God’s will in a more complex way suitable to the progressive development of humanity and humanity’s ability to grasp more and more complicated spiritual messages.

Key Terms

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