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Thomas Robbins

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“Quo Vadis” the Scientific Study of New Religious Movements?

THOMAS ROBBINS

The study of new religious movements has been developing in recent decades in an intellectual context in which both religion and its scholarly investigation appear to be more significant and more controversial than seemed to be the case in the earliest decades of SSSR. The present paper recounts the main themes of early work on nrms in the 1970s and 80s and subsequently explores three current areas of conceptual ambiguity and/or intellectual ferment and conflict. Key contemporary issues represent 1) The Boundary Problem or what is a “new religious movement”?; 2) The growing salience of the analysis of catastrophic episodes of mass violence involving nrms; and 3) Recent claims to the effect that scholars in the sociology of religion and religious studies who do research on nrms have been led by their strong ideological commitment to the defense of religious liberty to take up a defensive attitude toward controversial “cults” to a degree which has undermined objectivity.

CONTEST OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

When I was in graduate school in the mid and late 1960s, general sociology was increasingly embroiled in controversy and was pervaded by strident intellectual insurgence. But the sociology of religion appeared to be a quiet backwater. Although religion has been highly controversial throughout most of American history, the period immediately after World War II was characterized by a relative consensus and quiescence in which churches sought to give “no offense” (Cuddihy 1968). By the mid and late 1960s, religion, though beginning to manifest heightened controversy and conflict (Ellwood 1994), had not attained the level of controversy or experienced the threats to legitimacy which beset central political, military, economic, and educational institutions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed graduate students majoring in the sociology of religion, who were often ordained, were sometimes derided by other sociology students who viewed them as persons whose quaint obsession with things of the spirit kept them from being “relevant” and from attending to sociopolitical conflicts and revolution, which was ‘where the action is.’ Many scholars and intellectuals appeared to be committed, with varying degrees of specificity, to the Marxian duality of the fundamental economic “base” of society and its partly epiphenomenal, ideological “superstructure.”

The atmosphere has markedly changed since the late 60s. Religion now seems more significant but also more polarized and divisive. Robert Wuthnow wrote in *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988, 6).

On all sides religion seems to be embroiled in controversy. Whether it be acrimonious arguments about abortion, lawsuits over religion in the public schools, questions over who is most guilty of mixing religion and politics, or discussions of America’s military presence in the world, religion seems to be in the thick of it...The issues shift almost continuously, but the underlying sense of polarization and acrimony continues.

American religion thus appears to be growing in controversiality and is arguably significantly more controversial today than it was when an association dedicated to promoting a “scientific” study of religion was initially founded in 1949 (Wuthnow 1988; Robbins & Robertson 1991). This heightened controversiality is the context in which the study of nrms has been developing in

recent decades. The increasing controversiality of religion necessarily highlights issues of *objectivity* (Robbins & Robertson 1991). The social scientific study of new religious movements reflects and epitomizes the problems of studying religion in a period of religious turmoil and is thus presently beset by allegations of bias and partisanship and by some serious conceptual ambiguity. In this paper I will look at three troublesome or contested aspects of our engagement with nrms: 1) The conceptual "boundary" issue; 2) The analysis of episodes of extreme homicidal or suicidal violence associated with some movements; and 3) Allegations of bias and excessive "pro-cult" partisanship on the part of professional scholars studying nrms. First, however, it is necessary to briefly examine the early beginnings of nrm studies under the auspices of *SSSR*.

EARLY STUDIES OF NEW MOVEMENTS

Research and scholarly analysis of American "cults" and "new religious movements" (nrms) has been proceeding for three decades. Much of this scholarship is summarized and analyzed in volumes by Robbins (1988) and, more up to date, Dawson (1998) and is also represented in a two-volume collection (Bromley & Hadden 1993). This research commenced around the turn of the seventh decade of the Twentieth Century, papers by Nelson (1969) and Robbins (1969) representing early examples. At about the same time the social countermovement against "destructive cults" (Shapiro 1977), a countermovement which Shupe and Bromley (1980) later termed the "New Vigilantes," began to get underway.¹

Interestingly, early publications on American "new religions" by "scientific students" of religion did not initially attend to what later came to be called the "cult wars" (Sage 1975). On the other hand early publications by sociologists of religion in this area were characterized by a flavor which was markedly different from the writings of "anticultists." Many early sociological studies often tended to entail what Robbins (1988, 28-35) later termed the "Integrative Thesis." Converts to eastern gurus, novel mystico-occult groups and deviant messianic Christian movements were identified as being preponderantly young adults and adolescents who had previously been involved in deviant bohemian and "countercultural" lifestyles involving drug use, sexual promiscuity, and "drop out" retreatism. Through new spiritual movements such "alienated" young converts underwent de facto "resocialization," "rehabilitation," and social reintegration, which was said to be facilitated by the tendency of esoteric new movements to combine elements of countercultural and conformist value systems (Adams & Fox 1972; Anthony & Robbins 1974; Balswick 1974; Gordon 1974; Mauss & Petersen 1974; Richardson 1978a; Richardson et al. 1979; Robbins 1969; Robbins & Anthony 1972; Tipton 1982ab). The well-known book by Steven Tipton, *Getting Saved From the Sixties* (Tipton 1982b) represents the theoretically intricate culmination of this genre. NRMs were thus generally seen by their "scientific students" as *pro-social!*

However, by the end of the 1970s sociologists and other "scientific students" of religion had begun to explicitly address controversies over the alleged sinister "brainwashing" techniques and psychopathological consequences of "cults" and the controversial countermeasures employed by opponents such as physically coercive "deprogramming" (Anthony 1979-80; Barker, 1984; Bromley & Richardson 1983, 1985; Lofland & Skonovd 1981; Robbins 1984; Robbins & Anthony 1979; Shupe et al. 1978; Solomon 1981). Most sociologists of religion and sociologists in general were skeptical of the "brainwashing" argument, although there were notable early exceptions (Enroth 1977; Levine 1980; Ofshe & Singer 1986) and an interesting attempted synthesis of models by Long and Hadden (1983). It is likely that from 1970 through 1995 an increasing proportion of books and articles on "cults" and "new religions" dealt with cult/anticult conflicts and "brainwashing" issues (Anthony & Robbins 1982; Barker, 1984; Beckford 1985; Pfeifer & Ogloff 1992; Richardson 1991; Shepherd 1985). From 1978 (the year of Jonestown) to the present, an increasing proportion of books and articles by social scientists and religious studies scholars on cults, alternative religions, and millennial movements have surely dealt with *violence* associated with cults (Barker, 1986; Bromley & Melton forthcoming; Hall 1987; Hall & Schuyler 1998; Hall

et al. 2000; Robbins 1997; Robbins & Palmer 1997; Wessinger 2000ab; Wright 1995, 1999). Thus *increasing controversiality has characterized the study of novel and unconventional religious movements!*

It would certainly be misleading to imply that the theoretical focus of the “integrative hypothesis” overwhelmingly dominated the early scholarship on nrms. Another prevalent and seminal focus was directed to what Robert Wuthnow (1976) termed the “Consciousness Reformation” or the implications for new movements for both responding to and contributing to a significant transformation of values in American culture (Bellah 1975; Glock & Bellah 1976; Wuthnow 1976, 1978). Tipton (1982ab) adroitly synthesized the consciousness reformation and social reintegration models. The implications of new movements for the premise of secularization was a closely related early topic (Greeley 1972; Stark & Bainbridge 1980). An additional early concern was the problematic of relating new movements as well as the concept of “cult” to received sect-church typologies or developing new typologies (Nelson 1969; Richardson 1978b; Stark & Bainbridge 1979). A closely related focus involved the organizational transformation and institutionalization of new movements (Wallis 1975). Some of these early themes and concerns, particularly those involving sociocultural transformation, institutionalization, and controversies over brainwashing, violence, and cult/anticult vicissitudes continue to be important today and are discussed in the useful recent volume by Dawson (1998).

Early (1968-1978) studies of nrms and cults dealt largely with three kinds of groups: 1) “eastern mystical” and guru movements, 2) “Jesus Movement” groups whose colorful “Jesus freak” and “street Christian” participants combined countercultural and “hippie” styles with received evangelical and pentecostal beliefs, and 3) Religiotherapeutic “Human Potential” and “New Age” groups. The latter groups have recently been analyzed as “quasi-religious” or “borderline” phenomena (Greil & Robbins 1994). Their proliferation has led to an increasing awareness of the *boundary problem* which bedevils the study of “religious movements.” Two other developments have also increased the salience of this issue. Interestingly one factor was the waning in the early 1970s of the evanescent “Jesus Movement” and the movement of some of its devotees and epigoni into growing independent evangelical and pentecostal ministries. Whereas the ephemeral Jesus Movement was clearly “new” at least in some conspicuous respects, the question of whether the Vineyard ministries or the Toronto Blessing are “new religious movements” is more complicated. Finally the salience of “boundary” questions is enhanced by increasing awareness of the *global* context of new religious ferment and the degree to which new religious movements around the world tend to be *syncretic* and to combine not only elements from different cultures (Hexham & Poewe 1998) and different subcultures (Tipton 1982ab) but also to mix novel “modern” or “postmodern” elements with elements of traditionalist resurgence, e.g., it could be argued that “Islamic Fundamentalism,” which is not mere traditionalism, is a new religious movement. Thus, *what is distinctly “new” as well as what is clearly “religious” in various movements often appears to be up for grabs.*

Below we will build upon our abbreviated “mini-history” of nrm scholarship to discuss three key issues or problems which are having either a divisive or coherence undermining effect on the study of new religious movements.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Boundaries

After the 1998 *SSSR* meetings had finished, I had dinner with Lew Carter, who had been participating for several years in certain Lakota rituals. The latter had been performed for the past 19 years. However, it was believed that they had previously been performed for centuries before going on hiatus during the period of pre-multiculturalist white domination. Was my colleague involved in a “new religion” or a “revitalization movement” we wondered?

The conceptual boundary of the study area of “nrms” has never been terribly clear. What is a

new religious movement? Or a “new religion”? Do new pentecostal fellowships or “movements” within churches qualify? What is a new *religious* movement? Are so-called “therapy cults” included, even if they claim not to be religious? Does *movement* refer to a discrete “movement organization” such as the Church of Scientology or something more diffuse such as the “New Age Movement”? Picking these nits may seem tediously pedantic, but how can studies, findings, and theories in this area be collated, compared, evaluated, and extrapolated, as Robbins (1988) and more recently Dawson (1998) have attempted, without more conceptual clarity?

I don't have answers to these questions, but I will briefly describe three attempts to explore some of these issues. In 1985 Martin Marty published in an obscure humanities journal a conference paper, “Old New Religions and New Old Religions.” The former were said to include Eastern gurus and “occult” groups, which are “old in their parts of the world but new to most Americans.” While “the new old religions were the old-time [Western] religions that having encountered modernity, reacted and adapted” (1995, 12), e.g., “born-again” Christianity. Marty seems to imply that any distinction between a revitalization movement and a truly “new religion” is something of a regional illusion. Hare Krishna only seems like a “new religion” to Americans. In India it may be equivalent to a new Christian sect in the U.S..

I am rather more intrigued with the theoretical approach employed by Hexham and Poewe in their stimulating volume, *New Religions As Global Cultures* (1997). The authors assert that some neo-Hindu groups such as Hare Krishna “are revitalization movements and not new religions” while the Bhagwan (Rajneesh) movement and Transcendental Meditation are authentic new religions, as is the Unification Church, “a self-consciously global religion that blends Korean traditions with Christianity and science in a manner that raises many important questions for students of religion” (1997, 50). Authentic new religions are thus theologically innovative or at least broadly and *globally* syncretic. They intentionally combine elements from different cultures, and many of them contribute to an emerging transcultural theological paradigm of *spiritual evolution*, which is said to be supplanting the older Christian model of personal redemption.

Hexham and Poewe's conception is partly consistent with the approach of Reender Kranenborg in his 1999 conference paper, “Brahma Kumaris: A New Religion?” Kranenborg contrasts an authentic “New Religion” with a less innovative and comprehensive “new religious movement.” The latter is really rather similar to Hexham and Poewe's “revitalization movement.” For Kranenborg, a genuine “New Religion” is innovative in terms of content; its doctrinal and praxis break is recognized by both the new group and the tradition it breaks from; and it has an “all-encompassing program.” The Unification Church is said to more or less qualify except that, like Mormonism, it still claims to be within Christianity. Bahai is a very clear example of a new religion, and Scientology qualifies unless it can be seen to be linked to a received esoteric-gnostic tradition. But most nrms are not, it is claimed, true new religions, including Rajneesh, New Age, Branch Davidians, Hare Krishna, etc. Kranenborg lacks Hexham and Poewe's focus on global syncretism and their theory of the transformation of the theological content of modern religion. Kranenborg's criteria are actually somewhat ambiguous in application, e.g., how much of a “break” with tradition is sufficient? The Apostles Paul, Peter, and James would probably not have agreed on how much of a break they were making with Judaism? Doesn't Koresh or any Christian leader with a *messianic* self-concept make a significant break? In any case it seems apparent that the rigorous use of either Hexham-Poewe's or Kranenborg's conceptual systems would probably require would-be synthesizers such as Robbins or Dawson to substantially rewrite their books.

Explosions of Extreme Violence

Recent events involving extreme (e.g., mass) violence associated with nrms are attracting increasing attention and have generated numerous interesting papers, some of which appear in very recent or forthcoming collections by Robbins and Palmer (1997), Wessinger (2000a), and Bromley and Melton (forthcoming). A duality runs through many of these papers: *extrinsic* or

exogenous vs *intrinsic* or endogenous sources of violence and volatility. The former refer to persecution, provocation, and blundering by officials or "enemies" of a movement, e.g., the Waco tragedy as a "government massacre" (Wright 1999). The latter refer to intramovement variables related to apocalyptic worldview, charismatic leadership, institutional and ideological totalism and "mind control," etc. It is tempting to relate this duality to anticult vs anti-anticult conflicts, but there has actually been significant debate within our own scholarly community. Robbins (1997) has criticized some colleagues for going too far in terms of downplaying endogenous factors and placing exclusive emphasis on persecution and provocation from officials. Mayer (1999), Balch (forthcoming), and Reader (2000a) have stressed the absence of serious persecution in recent sensational episodes of collective violence involving groups such as Heavens Gate, The Solar Temple, and Aum Shinrikyo. Clearly the salience of each set of causal factors will vary from incident to incident and group to group. However, some writers have appeared to emphasize the importance of either endogenous or exogenous variables.

A highly sophisticated version of the extrinsic or relational approach is afforded by a seminal paper by Hall and Schuyler which appears as a chapter in *The Politics of Apostasy* edited by Bromley (1998). The authors note that authoritarian and closely-knit groups with apocalyptic worldviews are particularly likely to explode in extreme violence; however such explosions tend to occur in the context of intense conflict between the group and an aggressive coalition of apostates, sensationalist media and officials. The conflict *destabilizes the movement*. As the authors acknowledge, this model may be difficult to apply to Heavens Gate, which was obscure and not under attack in the 1990s, although it had been controversial in the 1970s (Balch 1980, forthcoming).

Although Hall and Schuyler compare Jonestown, Waco, and the Solar Temple killings, their analysis of the latter is crucial because it is intended to show how destabilizing external provocation need not entail the tangible *physical* intrusion which preceded the bloodshed at Waco and Jonestown. The problem is that the actual agitation against the Temple in Quebec was less intense than the mobilization against Scientology for several decades or against the apocalyptic Unification Church in its heyday and hardly amounted to "persecution" (Mayer 1999). But those better known, highly controversial groups did not erupt. A key endogenous factor might involve the Temple's self-concept as a *secret order* which may have diminished its tolerance for publicity and controversy. In any case Galanter's social system model of "cults" (1999; see also Dawson 1998, 148-153) and Wessinger's discussion of "fragile" movements (2000ab) suggest some factors such as diminishing leadership charisma, failure to attain extravagant goals, failed prophecies, ineffective recruitment, traumatic high-level defections, and internal conflicts, which help explain how and why some totalist groups turn in on themselves and become "paranoid" over the threat of boundary penetration. A more complex and multifaceted version of Hall and Schuyler's model is presented in a very recent publication (Hall et al. 2000).

Reader (2000b) maintains that a "post-Waco" phase of nrm scholarship entailing sensitivity to the role of stereotyping and provocation by officials and anticult activists in facilitating violence must now meet the challenge of a "post-Aum" phase involving a heightened awareness of the capacity of some groups and leaders for relatively unprovoked mayhem. A predisposition to regard nrms as victims may blind some scholars to the capacity for violence of movements such as Aum Shinrikyo and may thus undercut objectivity (Reader 2000b; Robbins 1997). This brings us to our third issue: debates over objectivity.²

Objectivity and Controversy

Recently scholars specializing in the study of nrms have come under attack. They are said to be excessively "cult-friendly" and to be "cult apologists" and "cult-sponsored experts." They are described as engaged in "blacklisting" scholars who are more critical of nrms and pressing scholarly organizations to lobby courts and legislators in behalf of manipulative and nefarious groups whom they have sometimes received favors from or have undisclosed ties to (West 1990; Zablocki 1997;

Kent & Krebs 1998; Allen 1999; Beit-Hallahmi in press). Their partisanship is said to undermine objectivity. Some scholars have been understandably resentful and severely critical with regard to these attacks (Richardson 1998).

In my view the eruption of this controversy at this time is both fortunate and unfortunate. It is unfortunate because it has led to much misleading and exaggerated hyperbole implying that we are craven academic propagandists probably stuffed with 'Moonie Gold.' Some of the accusers seem to be expressing the equivalent of the old McCarthyite categories of "sympathizers," and "well-meaning dupes." Ad hominem attacks have also flourished as Anthony (1999) and others have noted. A scholar's analysis or research report, it must be recognized, cannot be fully discredited by reference to the scholar's alleged (or actual) bias or his/her relationship with groups under investigation. We do not automatically disqualify Catholic or Mormon scholars (even if subsidized by their churches or church-run universities) from making valid contributions. Nor do we automatically disqualify clinical tests of new medications conducted by pharmacology corporations (Miller 1998). Intelligent critique must entail a detailed analysis of the putatively flawed methodology and theoretical models through which biases allegedly manifest. Some crusading critics of scholars of nrms appear to be reveling in a glib shortcut to legitimate critique. Naturally these strictures also apply to evaluations of the work of writers seemingly hostile to "cults;" moreover, disclosure of research funding is probably a valid norm.

But the emergence of this controversy also represents an *opportunity* to develop the *sociology of the sociology of religious movements*. Like other scholars, "scientific students" of new religious movements *do* have biases and values, backgrounds and interests, and discussion of such things need not be taboo or be viewed as blasphemous. Like many anthropologists we are inclined to defend the "tribes" we study, as it is hardly in our interest for such groups to be suppressed. As Beckford (1989) has noted, sociologists of religion have perceived their subarea to be somewhat marginal in general sociology, and thus they have allied with religious studies scholars and clerical intelligentsia to form hybrid associations such as the *SSSR*. In the process sociologists have admirably adopted the support for religious diversity, innovation and resurgence which characterizes religious studies. But it may also be significant that the American separation of church and state has impacted the study of religion by restricting "social programs" in the area of religion and thus inhibiting both the secular employment of students of religion and state and corporate funding for the study of religion. Our discipline has been funded largely by churches and now "cults" want to get in on the action. Zablocki (1997) suggests that research funding from the Church of Scientology or the Unification Church should be viewed differently from funding by the Episcopal or Methodist churches. But precisely where should the line be drawn? What about funding by Jehovahs Witnesses, a new pentecostal fellowship, or Wiccans? What should be the exact criteria? Might not a norm of full disclosure of funding sources be sufficient? In any case it is interesting to consider how the sympathies of our community might be affected if the government actually funded the training and employment of deprogrammers and inquisitors such that persons who have studied religion might expect to obtain positions in a control structure regulating disvalued groups? Might we not eventually become more favorable to enhanced state control?

"Scientific students" of religion can point out that they have clearly been more reflexive and self-scrutinizing concerning their biases than have their activist critics, e.g, the 1983 symposium on "Sponsorship and Scholarship" in *Sociological Analysis* and a 1998 symposium in *Nova Religio* on "Academic Integrity and the Study of New Religious Movements." Some scholars stigmatized as "cult apologists" have actually been highly critical of problematic groups (Barker, 1992). Though some scholars may feel slandered and beleaguered, shrill defensiveness will probably not help things. Similarly scholars who disagree regarding the relative weight of extrinsic or intrinsic factors contributing to violent episodes should refrain from viewing each other as inadvertent if not intentional persecutors or apologists. Depolarization is urged (Zablocki & Robbins in press).³

The impressive corpus of research and theory on religious movements produced by participants in this association (Dawson 1998) can probably only be marginally devalued by the kinds of

charges which are being trumpeted by crusading critics. We should realize, however, that “objectivity” will always be precarious and contested in a period of religious controversy and tumult.

CONCLUSION

Religion has been highly controversial during much of American history, but it may have been least controversial during the formative period of *SSSR* after World War II when major churches accommodated to American “civility” and strove to give “no offense” (Cuddihy 1969). The situation has changed. The analysis of extreme violence involving nrms as well as the growing controversy over the partisanship of professional scholars dealing with nrms is indicative of the tensions in the situation presently prevailing. Although the prospect of the scientific study of nrms being thoroughly discredited and relegated to the category of “pro-cult” propaganda has been overstated,⁴ we do need to distinguish ourselves from both crusading partisans and journalists, even if we may need to employ some techniques of investigative journalism to avoid inadvertently being dupes of manipulative groups (Balch & Langdon 1998). We need to pay more attention to theoretical frames which are not primarily partisan. Greater conceptual clarity and attention to theoretical ideas such as globalization, which may contextualize the nature, spread, and tensions generated by new religions (Hexham and Poewe 1998; Beckford 2000), may help.

NOTES

- 1 An article about deprogrammers appeared in *RollingStone* some time during 1969-71.
- 2 Reader (2000b) quotes Pye (1996) who sees a possible crisis in religious studies arising from the amazing behavior of Aum Shinrikyo and the prior uncritical attitudes of certain scholars who claimed expertise regarding Aum.
- 3 This paper will not discuss at any length the issue of *brainwashing*, which has been the key issue dividing many of the “scientific students” of new movements from “anticult” critics (Zablocki & Robbins in press) and which the author has previously discussed (Anthony & Robbins 1992, 1995). Important critiques of this concept and its application to nrms have been made by Barker (1984) and Richardson (1985). Some writers such as *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich (1997) contend that cultist techniques of mind control hold the key to understanding the volatility and violence of deviant movements. It should also be noted that the rhetoric alleging bias and partisanship has emerged somewhat as a superstructure covering the underlying foundation of disputes over alleged brainwashing at least in the sense that it is claimed that bias, partisanship, and liaisons with cults partly explain why professional students of religion so fiercely resist the brainwashing concept (West 1982, 1990; Zablocki 1997). Certainly this resistance has been very strong, and the *intensity* of the dispute over brainwashing calls out for contextualization. The author has elsewhere (1998) suggested a partial explanation for this intensity in terms of the formative association of early cult/brainwashing debate in the 1970s with the highly emotional issue of coercive-abductive *deprogramming* (Sage 1975; Shupe & Bromley 1980), whose supporters and opponents accused each other of practicing or condoning *kidnapping*. As Zablocki and Robbins (in press) and others have suggested, the whole “brainwashing” debate is permeated by conceptual ambiguity and by an absence of certainty as to *what the debate is really about*. Is “free will” the key issue or is it an unscientific metaphysical concept? Is the core issue the question of whether physical constraint is vital for psychological coercion? Or is *nomenclature* really the issue such that the sensationalist *brainwashing* term and its wild connotational baggage elicits particularly strong (and in my view valid) resistance. Anthony and Robbins (1995) and Dawson (1998) reject the “brainwashing” concept but have suggested that ideological and institutional *totalism* may be significant factors underlying the enhanced volatility and potential for violence which some groups manifest (Robbins, forthcoming).
- 4 An example of such overstatement may be the author’s suggestion (1998) that professional students of religion who oppose anticult claims might end up facing a destiny somewhat similar to that of the “Old China Hands.” These experts on Far Eastern affairs experienced career blockage in the early 1950s as a result of being stigmatized as being too tolerant of totalitarian Maoism and too critical of the corrupt but anticommunist Chinese Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek.

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