

# **THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF THE NEW RELIGIOUS LIFE**

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Roy Wallis

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THE NEW RELIGIOUS LIFE

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ROY WALLIS

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# **The elementary forms of the new religious life**

**Roy Wallis**

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For Bryan R. Wilson,  
teacher and friend



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## Preface

This book started life in 1977, when I began preparing an inaugural lecture on my appointment to the Chair of Sociology in The Queen's University of Belfast. Queen's took a considerable gamble in appointing a young (I have aged far more than five years since) and quite inexperienced lecturer to their vacant Chair. Whether that gamble paid off only they can judge. For my part, however, it should be said that I was honoured by the trust reposed in me by their decision, and that I have found Queen's to be a civilised and enlightened island within a sea of dogmatic intolerance, a sea which may at present lap the coasts of Ulster more fiercely than elsewhere in the British Isles, but whose tides ebb and flow far further afield. The Queen's University has been an environment congenial to scholarly endeavour, even in such exotic fields as those which have informed this book. I am grateful to it for its support of this research through many small grants and other facilities.

My interest in the new religions has persisted over some twelve years now, during which time I have conducted detailed studies of Scientology, the Children of God, the Human Potential Movement, and currently the movement of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, while maintaining a watching brief over the field generally, and mounting small expeditions to outposts of a great many of the movements referred to in the following pages. This is a controversial area for research. The Church of Scientology has been only one of the critics of my methods and integrity. While they have found my work biased against them, opponents of the Children of God and the Unification Church have found other grounds for objection. For some, my very willingness to engage with these groups, and to give them an open-minded hearing, has seemed reprehensible. In research of this kind, to be construed as biased by both sides is probably the only sure sign that one is getting it about right.

My studies over the years have been greatly assisted by grants from the Social Science Research Council, the British Academy, The Leverhulme Trust and the Nuffield Foundation. I wish to express my warm appreciation for these subventions, without which my research would not have been possible.

I have discussed many of the ideas in this book with Dr Steve Bruce, with whom parts of chapter four were formulated in Wallis and Bruce (1983). His willingness to drop everything and listen to a new conceptualisation has often sustained me. Other parts of this volume have had preliminary formulations in Wallis (1979b,

1982a, 1982c, and forthcoming). Dr Bryan Wilson, to whom this work is dedicated, has commented upon it in draft, and I wish to record my appreciation of his many kindnesses over the years.

Mrs Brenda Harkess and Mrs Evelyn Hunter have typed and retyped various efforts at creating and improving the text, and the final version was the joint product of Christine Clegg, Margaret Drumm, Helen McAllister, Gillian Ellis and Nicola Shearer to whom, with Miss Angela Smartt and Mrs Lorna Goldstrom who supervise the endeavours of the university Typing Centre, I am grateful for their efforts on my behalf and their unfailing good humour. My wife and children kept me sane.

# 1 Introduction

This essay presents a framework for conceptualising the new religious movements which have emerged in the West in the post-second world war period, particularly the extremely diverse range of movements which became prominent in the 1960s. This conceptualisation elaborates a logical trichotomy into three analytical types, and from this develops a theory of the origins, recruitment bases, characteristics, and developmental patterns which they display. Although some of the movements have been widely publicised, even attaining a certain notoriety through mass media treatment, for example: Scientology, Krishna Consciousness, the Unification Church, and the Manson Family; others such as The Process, Meher Baba, and 3-HO, are much less well known. While some became international, others remain small, local entities, or have already virtually disappeared. In multitudinous other ways too - style, ritual, belief, organisation, and so on - they exhibit enormous diversity.

While less discerning commentators have sought to describe and explain all the new religions as a unified phenomenon, or to treat each one as unique, more thoughtful and perceptive scholars such as Bryan Wilson have sought to distinguish them in terms of a limited number of types. Wilson, for example, constructs a classification on the basis of three themes which he finds to characterise the teachings of the new religions. The themes are:

that salvation is gained by becoming acquainted with a special, perhaps secret, knowledge from a mystic source; that ultimate salvation and knowledge comes from the liberation of powers within the self; that real salvation is attained by belonging to a saved community, whose life-style and concerns are utterly divergent from those of worldly people. (Wilson, 1976: 63)

Wilson's treatment of the new religions has been one of the more interesting and enlightening, but none the less it must be said that classification is of limited utility unless linked to a theory which *explains* salient differences distinguished by the classification.

Frederick Bird (1979) distinguishes between the various new religious movements in terms of 'the relationship of followers to masters or the relationship of the religious seekers to the sacred power they revere' (1979: 336). Thus, adherents may

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become '(a) devotees of a sacred lord or lordly truth, (b) disciples of a revered or holy discipline, (c) or apprentices skilled at unlocking the mysteries of a sacred, inner power' (ibid.). In the first category would fall Neo-Pentecostals, Divine Light Mission and Krishna Consciousness. (Descriptions of these groups - albeit inevitably brief and selective - will be presented in the pages that follow.) In the *disciple* category fall some of the smaller groups such as Integral Yoga, or the Zen Centers in the American West. (Groups of this type have not been widely described, but on Zen, see Tipton, 1982b). Examples of *apprenticeship* groups would be Silva Mind Control, *est*, Transcendental Meditation, or Scientology. Bird seeks to show that these different types of movement provide different ways of coping with the problem of 'moral accountability' which he believes to be one of the factors in their appeal.

Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony have produced one of the best known and most influential typologies of the new religious movements. Drawing theoretically upon Robert Bellah's (1967, 1969) conception of religious evolution and 'civil religion', they argue that the new religious movements are to be understood as a response to a crisis in American civil religion (Anthony and Robbins, 1982a). I shall examine this theory more closely in chapter four, when I consider the relationship between such movements and secularisation. Here, however, I wish to explore the typology which is associated with this theory.

Robbins and Anthony argue that two main types of response to the 'decline of civil religion' can be observed in the new religions: the emergence of '*dualistic* movements which reaffirm elements of traditional moral absolutism in an exaggerated and strident manner' (Robbins, Anthony and Richardson, 1978: 101), and '*monistic* movements which affirm relativistic and subjectivistic moral meaning systems' (ibid.). The former type are sometimes called 'civil religion sects' by Robbins and Anthony.

### DUALISTIC 'CIVIL RELIGION SECTS'

These movements articulate a protest against the ambiguity, relativism and permissiveness of modern culture, and reaffirm a 'theocentric ethical dualism'. They also aspire to reorder the political process and its assumptions, generally in a conservative direction. They fall into two sub-types: 'neo-fundamentalist', such as the Jesus People; and 'revisionist syncretic', such as the Unification Church. Other groups within this type are the Children of God, the People's Temple, and Synanon. In the face of resistance to their efforts to recast the political arena, or to initiate its transformation by supernatural means, they may 'create alternative communities as models of future American society' (Anthony and Robbins, 1982a: 221). They may thus become regimented 'total institutions' and sharply segregate their members from former associations and the wider society.

### 'MONISTIC GROUPS'

These movements articulate a 'vision of the universe in which there is an ultimate metaphysical unity or "oneness" which dissolves polarities and imparts an ultimately illusory or epiphenomenal quality (Maya) to the material world' (Robbins, Anthony and Richardson, 1978: 102). They cultivate an inner spiritual awakening and 'the exploration of intrapsychic consciousness'. They may thus converge with psychotherapeutic preoccupations. They tend to be ethically relativistic. Various sub-types of monistic movement are suggested, depending on the means by which enlightenment is secured, i.e. *technical* or *charismatic*, and on whether enlightenment is seen as involving one or two levels.

*Technical* movements employ defined techniques and standardised procedures of an instrumental kind, for example, TM, *est*, Scientology and (surprisingly) Krishna Consciousness. *Charismatic* movements promise enlightenment 'through veneration and emulation of leaders who are regarded as exemplars of advanced consciousness' (ibid.: 105). Examples are Meher Baba, Guru Maharaj-Ji, and Charles Manson. *One-level* movements see their members as being enlightened as soon as they are converted, or are movements in which enlightenment is seen as being attained very rapidly. Again TM and *est* are offered as examples, along with Scientology. *Two-level* movements view enlightenment as 'a characteristic of a rare stage of spiritual evolution' (ibid.: 106), for example, Meher Baba, Yogi Bhañan (Healthy-Happy-Holy Organisation).

This typology is ingenious and insightful. It illuminates the vast plethora of movements by dividing them into a set of categories which are economical in terms of the criteria employed, and which appear to be strong predictors of other attributes of the movements concerned. However, it is not without difficulties. ISKCON (Krishna Consciousness) may be monistic, as would be expected from a movement so clearly committed to Hindu traditional thought, yet it also possesses an aspiration to reform the social and political order, and has developed a model of the new world in its communal endeavours, such as New Vrñdāvana. Thus, in many ways it would seem to have more in common with the Children of God and the Unification Church, than with *est* or TM. It also seems somewhat curious to refer to the devotional practice of ISKCON, notably chanting the Hare Krishna mantra, as merely a technique for securing enlightenment.

Frederick Bird (1979: 337) has also raised some queries about the blanket description of the eastern-originated groups as monistic, 'not only because of the ontological and ethical dualisms which seem to be inter-related with Hindu Vedantism . . . but also because the significant differences between religions arising out of Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and Taoist traditions are blurred. . . .' He argues that some of the groups identified by Robbins and Anthony as monistic are, in fact, dualistic, suggesting some

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ambiguity about the correct application of these labels. Moreover, I would also argue that some of the groups in the monistic category have quite significant political aspirations - albeit not of a nationalistic kind (e.g. Scientology, and ISKCON, perhaps even TM in more recent years). On the other hand, it is not entirely clear to me that a movement like Synanon can be said to advance a political perspective which reaffirms a 'theocentric ethical dualism', as the basis for the re-invigoration of national consensus, and thus that it qualifies as a 'civil religion sect'. Therefore, not all dualistic movements would seem to qualify as 'civil religion sects'. Some seem to have no political orientation at all to speak of (e.g. the followers of Brother Evangelist, see Martin, 1979).

The Robbins and Anthony typology has achieved a substantial measure of descriptive validity, and its dimensions do appear to have some value in predicting further features of the movements in question. It must be recognised, however, that any given body of phenomena is susceptible to classification in terms of an infinite number of typological schemes. Thus, ultimately, the test of a typology lies not in its components, but rather in the uses to which it can be put, particularly that of identifying the significant characteristics of the phenomena in terms of a theory which turns out to be able to bear the heat of critical appraisal. It is at this point that the adequacy of the Robbins and Anthony schema falls most into question, but discussion of their theory, and that of Frederick Bird, will be reserved for a later stage, when I take up the issue of the role of secularisation, in chapter four.

These various typologies, then, all have considerable value in providing insight into the beliefs and structure of the new religious movements. However, in the pages that follow I shall advance an alternative typology which seems not only to provide some leverage on the divergent forms of the new religious movements, but which is also linked to an analysis of their sources of support, and of their developmental patterns.

#### A TYPOLOGY OF NEW RELIGIONS

The typology I wish to present requires the construction of a *conceptual space*. This conceptual space is formed by the components of a logical trichotomy, the elements of which constitute an exhaustive set of ways in which a new religious movement may orient itself to the social world into which it emerges. A new movement may embrace that world, affirming its normatively approved goals and values; it may reject that world, denigrating those things held dear within it; or it may remain as far as possible indifferent to the world in terms of its religious practice, accommodating to it otherwise, and exhibiting only mild acquiescence to, or disapprobation, of, the ways of the world. A visual representation of this is presented in Figure 1 (see page 6).