Chapter 13: New Religions and Movements

Chapter Overview

In this chapter on the “New Religions and Movements,” Roy C. Amore begins by distinguishing between the use of the terms “cult,” “sect,” and “new religion” then moves to a concise overview of new religious movements from the nineteenth century up to the present day. Amore divides the new religious movements into three main categories: (1) New Religions from the East; (2) Religions Arising from the Abrahamic Lineage; (3) and Religions Inspired by Other Forms of Spirituality.

In the first section devoted to “New Religions from the East,” Amore primarily focuses on Soka Gakkai, Falun Dafa (Falun Gong) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), also known as the Hare Krishnas. In the second section centered on the “Religions Arising for the Abrahamic Lineage,” Amore examines the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Baha’i Faith, the Nation of Islam, the Kabbalah Centre and Eastern Lightning: The Church of Almighty God. In the third section assessing “Religions Inspired by Other Forms of Spirituality,” Amore summarizes the key teachings and concepts within Wicca, Scientology, and Raëlianism.

In addition to these three categories, Amore briefly discusses the New Age movement in the final part of the chapter therein recounting antecedents within North America and connections to Eastern religious traditions. For each of the new religious movements, Amore gives a brief history of the movement, a summary of the main teachings of the movement, and explains key practices of the movement. Thus, in for each new religious movement, we see how the movement developed, the responses that it had, and the practices that resulted from its creation.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Distinguishes the differences between the interrelated terms: religion, sect, and cult.
2. Summarizes the origins, beliefs, and practices of Eastern movements that are now established in the West, such as Soka Gakkai, Falun Dafa (Falun Gong), and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).
3. Summarizes and delineates the origins, beliefs, and practices of Western movements such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Baha’i Faith, the Nation of Islam, the Kabbalah Centre, and Eastern Lightning: The Church of Almighty God.
4. Outlines, defines and summarizes the origins, beliefs and practices of select new religious movements not linked to any of the traditional mainstream religions, such as Wicca, Scientology and Raëlians.
5. Compares and contrasts the characteristics of the New Age movements therein illustrating the continuities and differences across the spectrum of these new religions.

Study Questions

1. What is the *falun* in the new religious movement Falun Dafa? What does it do?
2. Yang Xiangbin is associated with what religious movement? What is her identity and what writing has she contributed to that tradition?
3. What is the significance of the number four within Wiccan traditions?
4. Scientology is based on L. Ron Hubbard’s theory of dianetics. What is dianetics and how is it related to engrams?
5. What are the two main practices in the Raëlian Movement?

Study Questions: Answers

1. In Falun Dafa, the *falun* is a “law wheel” that develops in the abdomen of the practitioner. Once acquired, the *falun* spins in accordance with the universe. When rotating clockwise, the falun absorbs and transforms energy from the universe; when rotating counter-clockwise, the *falun* dispenses salvation and healing powers. (p. 597)
2. Yang Xiangbin is adored as the new Christ in the Eastern Lighting: The Church of Almighty God. Xiangbin is believed to be the returned Christ, or the second of “two incarnations.” Eastern Lightning considers the book authored by Yang Xiangbin, known in English as *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, to be a new scripture for this new age. (p. 611)
3. Four is a foundational number in the structuring of the Wiccan calendar and worldview. The festival calendar is constructed of two sets of four festivals, or sabbats. Four of the sabbats have fixed dates: Candlemas; May Day; Lammas; and Hallowe’en. The other four sabbats mark significant dates in the solar cycle: Spring; Summer; Autumn; and Winter. Other Wiccan symbols include the number four in terms of the four directions and the four elements (earth, water, fire, air). (p. 614)
4. The term “dianetics” comes from the Greek words *dia*, meaning through, and *nous*, meaning mind or soul. The main theory in dianetics, which Hubbard published in his book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (1950), is that one needs to clear the mind from mental blocks, or engrams. Engrams result from traumatic experiences, and one needs to go through an auditing process (which is done with the use of the “E-meter”) to help with the clearing of engrams. (p. 615)
5. The first practice is an initiation ceremony that involves the renunciation of all ties to theistic religions and is called the “Act of Apostasy.” This renunciation is followed by a baptismal ceremony, wherein the DNA of the practitioner is given to the Elohim. The second practice is known as “sensual meditation” or “meditation of the sense,” where one turns inward to understand the universe in one’s body, and then turns outward to experience the universe beyond one’s body. (p. 619)

Research Questions

1. The Raëlian Movement is known for being interested in cloning science. Why is this so? How does cloning science relate to the ideas of this movement?
2. What are the key differences in the practices of Wicca in England and in the United States?
3. How did L. Ron Hubbard’s theory of the “thetan” develop? How is this theory described in his writings and in his cosmology?
4. Soka Gakkai grew out of the teachings of the monk Nichiren. How have the teachings of Soka Gakkai changed from the early teachings of Nichiren?
5. Malcolm X is a key figure in the history of the Nation of Islam. What were his teachings? How did his teachings change through the years?
6. What are the foundational ideas about Krishna and bhakti yoga within the foundational texts for the Hare Krishnas, that is, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Srimad Bhagavatam*.?
7. Outline the key teachings in Yang Xiangbin’s *The Word Appears in the Flesh* and provide an historical explanation for its status as new scripture in the new religious movements known as Eastern Lighting: The Church of Almighty.
8. Why is the New Age movement associated with “holistic” practices? What do these practices entail? What are some of the terms and metaphors that may be used to frame and interpret the New Age movement?
9. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is known for its interest in genealogy. How does this interest correlate to some of their teachings, rituals and practices?
10. What are the central elements of Baha’i worship practices? What is the significance behind these various aspects of Baha’i worship?

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think that the terms “sect” and “cult” have negative connotations?
2. Why do you think the media tend to focus on controversies that involve these new religious movements?
3. Which of the new religious movements do you find the most intriguing? Why?
4. Why do you think that feminists are more attracted to some of the new religious movements?
5. What do you think are the key differences among the three spiritual roots of the new religious movements as presented in this chapter?

Additional Resources

1. History’s Mysteries: Cults (2000), *The History Channel*.

Part of the History Channel’s series *History’s Mysteries*, a historical look a cults and their appeal from antiquity, such as the Egyptian cult of Isis, to cults turned accepted religions such as Christianity, to modern cults, such as the Branch Davidians. The documentary is available on YouTube at the following: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYhKCoQ2I-w&list=PL pHQFR1whr9tedK5KP\_igREFo8gwiE\_6&index=55](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYhKCoQ2I-w&list=PL%20pHQFR1whr9tedK5KP_igREFo8gwiE_6&index=55)

2. *Different Paths: Shamanism, Cults, and Religion on Demand* (1998, Films for the Humanities and Sciences)*.* <https://www.films.com/id/10289> This is a documentary program by the Films Media Group on shamanism, millennialism, astrology, the upsurge of New Age religions, and new forms of spirituality. The link above has a preview and description, contact information, ways to access the documentary.

3. Soka Gakkai International (SGI) Association of Canada. <http://www.sgicanada.org/>

This website promotes Soka Gakkai in Canada. It contains videos, news clips, testimonies and publications on Buddhism, past presidents, activities, publications, books and news.

4. Falun Dafa. <https://en.falundafa.org/> This official website of Falun Dafa (Falun Gong) introduces the history and the unique eight ways of this movement. Additionally, there is an excellent selection of the sacred writings (in Chinese and translated in English) and a number of recent writings that may be downloaded as PDF documents. Videos, lecture, music and other links that provide news, personal stories and ways to support this persecuted movement.

1. The Bahá’í Faith: The website for the worldwide Bahá’i community.

<https://www.bahai.org/>.

This official website of the Baha’i faith includes articles and reference material on what Baha’is believe; What Baha’is do; and the Baha’i Reference Library.

1. The Kabbalah Centre | The Kabbalah Centre International. <https://kabbalah.com/en>

This website provides a wide range of resources (e.g., the Zohar, articles, videos, events, courses, directory of centers, etc.) in order to promote the “ancient spiritual wisdom that empowers us to improve our lives, discover our purpose, and achieve the lasting fulfillment we are meant to receive.”

7. George D. Chryssides. and Benjamin E. Zeller, eds. 2014. *The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements*. London: Bloomsbury Academics.

8. Jamie Cresswell and Bryan Wilson, eds. 2012. *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*. New York: Routledge.

9. James R. Lewis. 2008. *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

10. *Supersoul* with Oprah Winfrey. <http://www.oprah.com/app/super-soul-sunday.html>

This is the website for full episodes of Orpah Winfrey’s Emmy award winning daytime series Super Soul Sunday, in which, the stated purpose is to offer a range of perspectives from “renown thought leaders to awaken viewers to their best selves.” Many of the invited guests may be described as self-help and life coaches, spiritual guides, teachers or gurus of forms of spirituality that may (or may not) fit within the New Age movement.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For most sacred sites, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.