



# Usefulness of the concept of new religious movements

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## Abstract:

*New Religious Movements are vital in understanding the changing social and cultural milieu of the past century. The important period to study in this light is after 1960s. It is this period that witnessed the manifestations of NRMs through the second and third generation members which corresponded with a dilution of their original 'sectarian' qualities. The purpose of this essay is to determine the usefulness of the concept of NRMs and their relevance in lights of the larger socio-structural changes that are taking place. There is an attempt to transcend the boundaries of the traditional psychological approaches to the study of NRMs that are usually employed.*

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**Keywords:** *Religious Movements, social and cultural changes*

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## 1. Introduction

The first section of this essay will talk about how one can study and understand new religious movements. The second part shall discuss the typologies and models of New Religious Movements. The third section attempts to undermine the people who embrace NRMs - Joiners. The fourth section attempts to understand more NRMs with the help of examples.

The essay draws information mainly from works of Lorne. L. Dawson who put together works of a number of a number of scholars to provide us a better understanding of the new religious movements (NRM) or cult and allowing us to get over the stereotypical stigmatization attached with it. Along with it to put forward examples of NRMs in contemporary Indian context we see considered the work from scholar like Maya Warrier – “Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission” and Copeman, Jacob & Aya Ikegame “Guru Logics”.

## 2. New religious movements / Cults:

The coming in of 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by modernity, globalization and cosmopolitanism. With this, we see a change in people's dressing sense, their leisure activity, transportation etc. Just like that a transformation can also be in the domain of religion marked by the coming in of “cults” or the NRMs. They became a key scholarly concern when post mid twentieth century when cults began to appear as problem for modern west when the young generation abandoned their family life and their careers to join intense religious groups and generating a hostile feeling among the parent generation towards these new cults.

Eileen Barker (1999, 16) defines NRMs as, “The definition from which I personally start - for purely pragmatic reasons - is that an NRM is new in so far as it has become visible in its present form since the Second World War, and that it is religious in so far as it offers not merely narrow theological statements about the existence and nature of supernatural beings, but that it proposes to answer to at least some of the other kinds of ultimate questions that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions, questions such as: Is there a God? Who am I? How might I find direction, meaning and purpose in life? Is there life after death? Is there more to human beings than their physical bodies and immediate interactions with others?” (Barker, E. 2003. Cults and New Religious Movements a Reader. Blackwell publishing, pp7-25.)

For her the social construction of reality rather than being subjective is also based on the social position from where the social reality is perceived. Thus, in a need to counter the public prejudice attached with the NRMs, Barkers claims that social scientist are capable of providing the most accurate and objective understanding of the NRMS than its competitors like the anti-cult movement, the media, the law etc. and that's because of the method that is employed by the social science – comparative method, empirical testing and reflexivity. However, she also believes that the social scientist does face competition from the other sources of social reality and therefore it becomes necessary that they should move ahead with co-operation with their competitors. (Barker, E. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

### **3. Cult Controversies & Continuum:**

Moving ahead with the prejudices attached with the cults, one of the most common preconceived notions being attached to them is that they are more prone to problems as a religious collectivity including exploitation, authoritarian leadership, harassment, deception etc. However, James A. Beckford tries to debunk this idea by arguing that rather than cults, many religious collectivities carry their problems as well. He gives example of non-minority movements- systematic sexual abuse of children in care of Catholic priests; Racism in Church of England. (Beckford, J. A. 1998. The Joiners. In : Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

But then why does one see that problems being attributed to cults get exaggerated than the higher problems attributed to the considered religious collectivities. He gives its reason by pointing out characteristics of late 20<sup>th</sup> century in advanced industrial society. Firstly, massification and demonization which means that the new age carried its own machinery of the normalization and anything that doesn't comply to it was put under suspicion and members of some minority movement carried different priorities accorded to them in pursuit of their belief. Also, with the coming in of modernity we see the rise in individuation and therefore non – conventional religious practices were considered unnecessary invoking a break from public life. Secondly, we see that with the rise in technology of communication the small religious movements are able to reach a larger audience though at the same time it also becomes beneficial for it opponents to use the same technology to propagate against them by reaching out to large number of people. Lastly, the rise of secularization seen with the coming of industrial society we see a polarization been taking place between religiously apathetic majorities and religiously energetic minorities. (Beckford, J. A. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

So, what could be done to make the NRMs appear normal, making them more acceptable. Beckford argues that their tolerance lies on the fact that they are able to satisfy secular criteria of religious authenticity. In earlier times the religious minorities were tolerated if they paid, they paid the taxes. Similarly in the current period as well they gets tolerated as far as they fulfill the non-religious condition imposed by the state, for example, by complying to perform the military services (in parts of Southern Europe) or by availing to the publicly available medical services. (Beckford, J. A. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

Hence the NRMs rather than being considered as a different or unconventional religion presents a continuum to us. “A dispassionate analysis of the social aspects of religion suggest that, within all religious organizations, some practices are accepted as clear evidence of religious authenticity & other are suspected of compromising that authenticity”. (Beckford, J. A. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader. Pp 30).

### **4. Types of new religious movements**

The development of a range of new religions and the revival of some old ones, in the 1970s, led Roy Wallis to categories these new religious movements. Weber's influence on Wallis is discernible,

especially in Wallis's assumption that groups tend to become increasingly more accommodating towards the mainstream over time. Wallis following the Weberian style divided his typology into three 'ideal types'. (Wallis, R. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

The first type he proposed was that of world-rejecting groups, and it perhaps most closely conforms to popular images of new religions. According to Wallis, 'world-rejecting groups', are like a closed group of followers who believe that the outside world is impure, therefore, minimum contact needs to be maintained with outside world. Being closed, they in course of time develop authoritarian tendency and group take a clear precedence on the individual. In the cosmology of such movements, the members remain hopeful that a new 'world order' will usher in which the movement will have a significant role to play. Wallis places ISKCON and the Children of God in this group. (Wallis, R. 1998. The Joiners. In : Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

Wallis's second type was that of 'world-affirming groups. These are highly individualistic and less religious in comparison to the first category. But they don't treat the world as 'impure', rather they seek to attain 'human potential' through the release of divinity or creativity inherent in the person. They include seminar-oriented organizations such as The Forum and Insight, Sahaja Yoga etc., which can be placed into this category. Example – Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation. (Wallis, R. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

The third type according to Wallis contains world-accommodating groups. These are movements who do not necessarily see themselves as an all-encompassing or unique path. Instead, they offer highly experiential techniques that can be utilized by people in order to revitalize their spirituality more generally. Wallis included organizations such as charismatic churches in this category. This typology offered by Wallis is presented as ideal types, not as mutually exclusive empirical categorize. Empirical instances will therefore only approximate these types, of course, often combining elements of more than one orientation. These typologies have considerable value in providing insight into the beliefs, and structures of the new religious movements. Example - NeoPentecostalism. (Wallis, R. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

## 5. Model of Cult Formation

William Sims Bainbridge & Rodney Stark provides us the models of how novel religious ideas are formed & spread. There are three main models: (a) psychopathology model; (b) entrepreneur model; (c) sub-culture evolution model. Cult formation includes a two-step process: forming the new religious idea and social acceptance of these ideas. They also provide to us the concept of exchange compensator - "set of beliefs and prescriptions for action that substitute for the immediate achievement of the desired reward" (Stark, W. S. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader. Pp 59)

First, the Psychopathology model: It describes cult formation as result of individual mental illness that gains social expression. The individual gains his novel visions under during this period. He also develops new compensators to fulfill his needs. After the psychotic period is over the individual is able to form a new cult if more individuals suffer from the same problems, originally faced by cult innovators. Such cults come up during the time of crisis when a number of people suffer from the same problem. (Stark, W. S. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

Second, the Entrepreneur model: Its different from the first model as here the cult founders consciously develop a new compensator system in order to exchange them for great rewards rather than for their own personal use. It requires a supply of novel compensator. The manufacturing & sales are done by the entrepreneur and main motive behind all this process is to gain profit. (Stark, W. S. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader).

Third, the subculture evolution model: It emphasizes on group interaction process rather than individual innovator. They form when people with similar needs, desires or problems meet and share mutual understanding because of their common suffering. Here the cult is a result of a failure to obtain a non-existent reward in the form of a group. With repetitive failure to achieve their goal they generate & exchange compensators. (Stark, W. S. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

## 6. Who Joins the NRMs?

Saul Levine points out that the people who radically depart and joins NRMs are the ones who come under category of adolescence to early adulthood, i.e. from age group 16 to 26. They are neither too much dependent on their parents (financially and emotionally) nor have the responsibilities like job, families. Also, the ones who depart belong from middle or upper middle class since the less affluent people don't have the financial backings and they carry the burden of family responsibilities as well. The statistics gathered by Saul Levine shows less divorce rate in those who join NRMs when compared to national rate. For becoming successful in middle class culture, separation and individuation are essential which in a way lead towards the detachment of an individual from his family. (Levine, Saul. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader)

Focusing on the psychological aspect of this detachment it can be seen that during infancy, the child carries hardly any notion of self and very close relation is shared with his/her parents. With the growing age the child becomes more aware about himself and during pre-adolescence, a number of other individual apart from parents like peers, neighbors, teachers etc. plays an important role for the individual who is now more concerned about forming an identity of self. Thus, creating greater detachment and individuation. They carry a sense of unbelongingness. "One could sum up desolation by saying that radical departures feel they belong with no one, believe in nothing." (Levine, Saul. 1998. The Joiners. In: Lorne Dawson(edited) Cults and New Religious Movements A Reader. Pp 140)

## 7. Usefulness of NRMs through Examples:

In recent times, with the coming in of modernity, industrialization in India, a recent trend of gurus and their organization can be seen, providing a flexible mode to practice religion.

This whole concept relation shared between a guru and devotee gets framed under the idea of guru ship and scholars like Copeman, Jacob and Aya Ikegame provides to us its prominent feature of uncontainability through their work "Guru Logics".

The uncontainability may carry a huge diversity, for example the donation of bodies made for dissection and medical research promoted by the Dadhichi Body Donation society that considers the donated body to be a guru for the future generation of medics. Other practical techniques of expansion may include public/ civil society welfare activities like large quantities of blood donation to Red Cross under name of Sant Nirankari guru. (Copeman, Jacob and Aya Ikegame. 2012. Guru Logics)

Apart from this, different attributes of a guru are considered most suited to have substantial position as apolitical leader. "As Ikegame notes (2012a), a guru putative kinlessness can cause him to be seen as an ideal figure for politics because, lacking children to direct funds to, they are considered far less like to succumb to corrupt practices." (Copeman, Jacob and Aya Ikegame. 2012. Guru Logics. Pp 318)

Further a new idea of 'gurugovernmentality' can be seen coming up which shows how the state uses the guru devotee relationship to fulfill certain governmental goals. For example, the Mathas of Karnataka are seen as a parallel state, operating for free hospitals, free schools, free mid-day meals etc. As a result the BJP led state government begun to use mathas as their executive agents for state distributes funds. Thus, forming a Sacred Public-Private Partnership. (Copeman, Jacob and Aya Ikegame. 2012. Guru Logics)

Mata Amritanandamayi Mission: Maya Warriar through her work “Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission” showing us the trends towards the secularization of civil society with a growing interest of public towards new coming guru organization in India. The majority of the people come from the educated urban, middle-class families. (Warrier, M. 2003. Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission.)

“Let me clarify on the outset, what I mean by ‘Secularization’. I refer here to a process where religious affiliation comes increasingly to be seen not as a requirement, but as an option, 'one among a range of possible loyalties freely chosen and freely left' (Vanaik 1997: 10), and where 'the case for free choice and complete revisability of religious identities be[comes] increasingly accepted and respected' (ibid.) (Warrier, M. 2003. Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. Pp 213)

The peculiarity of these organizations is that they tend to focus more on the private and individual aspect of life (self-authorship & self-fulfillment) than the public or collective aspect of it.

Mata Amritanandamayi belongs to the bhakti tradition of Hindu faith. She is considered as an avatar guru who aims for alleviation of human sufferings. She had a vast organizational network in order to fulfill her mission named as Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. There were 2 important aspects of Mata Amritanandamayi’s religious life. The first one is that she would communicate to her devotees through divine embracement to cure their sufferings. This shows the intimate and personal interaction between a guru and her devotee. The second important aspect is the importance she attaches to this worldly concern rather than other worldly concern. This gets reflected in efforts to establish schools, orphanages, hospitals and other institutions. (Warrier, M. 2003. Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission.)

Maya Warriar through her work also raises question on the claims made by the earlier scholars on urban middle class for being a huge subscriber of guru organization. The earlier scholar argues that the urban middle class experienced a sense of lack, alienation due to the impersonal modern urban environment. But Warriar debunks these ideas by arguing that firstly rather being devoid of connection and carrying a sense of less belongingness to the community they do share close ties with other peoples apart from families like social clubs, alumni associations etc. Secondly, she argues that this population didn’t lose a touch with the earlier religious tradition of their parents or grandparents. They adhered less to it because they felt dissatisfied with the mechanical religious observances and aimed for a greater meaning in their religious life.

Therefore, the coming in of growth in urban Indian environment rather than being alienating and stressful, it allowed for a rise in awareness of individual, developing multiple choices in every sphere of life including religion as well. (Warrier, M. 2003. Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission.)

Guru organizations are a religion of choice. There are 2 crucial elements related to the notion of choice: first, personal freedom –creating a religious life that suits to particular individual taste and second, self-authorship of highly personalized form of religious faith. This can be seen with respect to different option being available to devotees themselves. For example, personal freedom is central to the choice of guru one chooses amongst many. Also, the community of followers is not closely bounded community with ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ but a very fluid one. Here, what needs to be focused upon is ‘flexibility’. In context of the teachings of Mata Amritanandamayi it’s important to understand the universality, worldly gains and again the flexibility and choices of the practices offered. She also gives ethnographic account to provide for more personalized and interiorized faith in devotees which in itself contains the seeds of

secularization. (Warrier, M. 2003. Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission.)

## 8. Conclusion

In most of the studies surrounding NRMs, the focus is over the belief, practice and experience of an individual. This essay examined the social dimension to it. But what is important to look at is the works of Durkheim (1899) where he talks about the movement of society from ancient to modern industrial societies. For him as the society is progressing, it is moving towards more restitutive laws and organic solidarity. Here, individuation and specialization is central to his analysis. So we can also look at the NRMs through this perspective where as an organization they have established specialized departments and structures and an individual is getting to experience the guru in more intimate and personal ways.

The conceptualization of New Religious Movements is important and useful due to its growth in the recent period. The world is going through larger structural changes with industrialization, urbanization, secularization and individuation. These changes make the study of NRMs more vital in understanding the behavior of masses as well as societal whole. This cannot be studied in the manner of cause and effect relationship between larger structural changes and NRMs but as the dialectic between them which is surrounding NRMs. The changes are also brought about by NRMs in these larger socio-structural dimensions.

Systematic studies of NRMs and cults have helped to scotch several common, but mistaken assumptions. They show that modern people are not necessarily less religious than their ancestors, that religious innovation is no more likely to be progressive than conservative, that religion is not the exclusive prerogative of church, temple or mosque type organization, and that the dynamics of new religious movements cannot be separated from social change. NRMs look to become more numerous, and the rate of their proliferation will probably increase in the foreseeable future. The study of their dynamics is therefore central to an understanding of the place of religion in all societies

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