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*A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious
Movements* by W. Michael Ashcraft (review)

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Reviews

A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements. By W. Michael Ashcraft. Routledge, 2018. vii + 251 pages. \$149.95 cloth; ebook available.

Emerging first from sociology and then later converging with history and religious studies, the academic field we know today as new religions studies (or New Religious Movement Studies in this volume) has followed a developmental path that only the great Odysseus or even Jason and his fellow Argonauts could appreciate. In a most unexpected way, this disciplinary voyage that Michael Ashcraft traces began with early- to mid-twentieth century attempts by American Protestant theologians to account for the presence of novel religious expressions (or “cults”) in their own time. As they attempted to set this phenomenon within European church-sect typologies, it became obvious to these theologians, and to the social scientists to follow, that not all religions fit so neatly within the Weber-Troeltsch framework. Dissatisfaction led almost naturally to the search for more accurate and ever more complex typologies (viz., church-sect-denomination-cult). But even then, typological approaches failed to account for the rise and persistence, if not the variety, of newer religions in America. Descriptive approaches explained little.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, sociologists, most of whom had been accustomed to following the currents of secularization theory and many having spent their energies responding to anticultists, not only found it difficult to change course but found themselves being tagged as apologists by their detractors. By the 1990s, however, when history and religious studies added broader perspective and greater interpretive possibilities to this burgeoning field, the course seemed to widen. Indeed, Ashcraft’s book documents a field that is now under full sail.

The story that Ashcraft tells is one of personalities, conference symposia, publications, and changing trends. He lays out the history of the field in five chapters that point to at least three different periods of development. The first period (chapter 2) was dominated by typological approaches to understanding new religions, with the inchoate field noticeably dividing into those who studied sectarian movements along with (and sometimes against) those who studied cults. The second period (chapter 3) was driven by the counterculture, the cult wars, and sociologists’ responses to the anticultists’ charges of brainwashing. Additionally, Ashcraft divides the development of scholarship into

macro- and micro-levels of analyses, with macro concerned with the broader cultural conditions that led to a new religious consciousness, and micro concerned with the individual converts and their reasons for joining new and alternative religions as well as the success or failure of such religions. Theoretical responses to the anticultists and the Satanism scare of the 1980s comprise much of the third period in Ashcraft's narrative (chapter 6).

In chapters 4 and 5 Ashcraft continues his historical examination of the two main trends (academic and apologetic) that had been the original germ of the field earlier in the twentieth century—two ever-warring approaches. The main exponents shaping the academic wing of new religions studies focused most of their energies hosting conferences, generating survey data, and developing bibliographical materials. Chapter 4 also recounts the controversy over scholars' participation in conferences sponsored by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church.

The development of the apologetic wing of new religions studies—which Ashcraft calls “Cultic Studies” as opposed to “NRM Studies”—rallied around the perceived threat of the new and alternative religions that had been attracting spiritually-dissatisfied and disillusioned youth in noticeable numbers. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, concerned parents, ministers, and psychologists had all mobilized to take on these cults, chief among them being ISKCON (Hare Krishna), The Children of God, and the Unification Church (the Moonies). Conversions to these cults could not have been genuine, they asserted. Susceptible to the siren song of charlatans, unsuspecting American youth had been brainwashed. Here, then, is where the battle lines were drawn. Indeed, the history of scholarship published during the 1980s and 1990s (chapter 6) was driven by disproving the claims of the cultic studies wing of the field, resulting in a “growing chasm between scholars in Cultic studies and scholars in NRM studies” (135).

In a break from the historical narrative, Ashcraft turns to three main topics of continuing interest: violence (chapter 7); gender (chapter 8); and fieldwork (chapter 9). Each of these chapters reads like extended review essays with helpful historical context. Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidians comprise the narrative on violence and new religions. Theosophy, the Shakers, ISKCON, and the Rajneesh movements highlight the discussion of women in new religious movements. Insider/Outsider issues are the focus of concern in the chapter on fieldwork, which features the path-breaking work of Eileen Barker among the Moonies, E. Burke Rochford within ISKCON, and Sarah Pike within Wicca. For this reviewer, these three chapters stand out as the best crafted in the book and are must-reads for graduate students entering the field.

If there are criticisms, they are not with organization or content or the way that Ashcraft is able to marshal vast amounts of information in

recounting this complex history. Instead, one might fault the author's shifts in storytelling style. At times it seemed as if the author were giving a lecture, then at other times relating anecdotes from an interview, and at still other times writing book reviews or encyclopedia entries. Even so, this book is fun, and even a bit nostalgic, for those of us who came of age academically during the 1980s and 1990s (yes, we all have our Gordon Melton stories). Ashcraft's book will also give solid historical grounding to the generations of scholars studying new religions in the future.

The last chapter offers a postscript of sorts. By the early 2000s, new religions studies had begun to break free from the cult wars. The older *cults*, having become established *religions*, are not all that interesting to the newer generation of scholars. In fact, in the current digital age of hyper-reality, scholarship is being propelled by concerns over the fragility of culture and community—a world of constructed, contingent, commodified meaning. Religion, such as it is, has become largely self-referential. If new religions studies is able to navigate along these new currents, concludes Ashcraft, “then the field is enriched by creative, outside-the-box concepts that push the older boundaries of what makes something an NRM” (241).

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Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal. By Tisa Wenger. University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 312 pages. \$34.95 cloth; ebook available.

This is an ambitious but worthwhile volume that traces the role the social construction of religious liberty has played in the history of relationships with various minority populations in America, such as Native Americans, African Americans, Jews, and Catholics. The historical role the multi-faceted and malleable concept has played in international affairs of the United States is also examined in detail in a chapter delineating machinations involving American efforts to claim and control the Philippines more than a century ago. The volume focuses on the time between what Wenger refers to as “the Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American War” and World War II, which she refers to as a “pivotal period in our histories of race and empire” (1).

Wenger's basic theme is that a specific type of religious freedom derived from white Protestantism has been the driving force behind efforts to integrate, control, and assimilate various minority ethnic groups into American society. She notes, “The dominant voices in the culture linked racial whiteness, Protestant Christianity, and American national identity” (1). Somehow minority ethnic and racial groups had to accommodate themselves to this pervasive and powerful cultural force.