10 The New Religions – Issues and Controversies

The new religions, ranging from the new religious movements (NRMs) to the New Age, have obviously attracted a great deal of academic interest. Among the themes that have been explored in depth are; who is attracted to the new religions, why are some more successful than others and why do a very small number control their members in an abusive way to the extent of bringing the self-destruction of the group? This chapter considers these issues and also looks at how state authorities and the public at large have responded to these new movements and examines what the wider implications are.

Who joins the new religions?

Another way of accounting for the rise of the new religions is through analyzing what kind of people constitute their membership. A popular conception is that converts are derived from deprived groups. However, these do not necessarily have to be the poorer sections of society. They may also be relatively deprived younger middle-class people. The latter are individuals who do not necessarily lack material wealth, but feel spiritually deprived in a world which they see as too materialistic, lonely and impersonal. While usually not appealing to the needs of the more economically deprived which are, more frequently, provided by world-rejecting groups, world-accommodating varieties offer a kind of spiritual substitute for those who otherwise lead fairly mundane respectable lives. Wallis (1984) touches upon this in his account of recruitment to world-accommodating religions. He claims that members are generally those who have some stake in the world;
however, such movements help members cope with their social roles, sometimes by offering the safe haven of a sub-culture to which they can retire. Often unconcerned with trying to alter the world or furthering the worldly opportunities of members, numerous movements seem orientated to dealing with the negative effects of modern society.

Other studies have found that members of world-affirming types tend to be rather older than those from other NRMs. The average age of participants in human potential groups was found to be 35, while Ellwood (1973) discovered that 43 per cent of members of Nichiren Shoshu were over the age of 36. These recruits were inclined to be even more predominantly middle-class and affluent than those of other movements. Many of them seemed professionally qualified and had started promising careers. Wallis argues that, in contrast, although open to all types of people, the attraction of world-affirming movements is often to wealthier social groups who have a significant interest in the world as it is. Members seek no compensation, only religious expressions which enhance their lives by offering a religious path to guilt-free, spontaneous self-advancement largely through human potential therapies.

Studying what might be interpreted as a world-rejecting movement, Judah (1974) found that 85 per cent of Krishna Consciousness members in the USA were under 26 years old, while only 3 per cent were over 30. In terms of social background, many were upper-middle-class in origin. Also in the USA, Ellwood (1973) discovered that participants in the Jesus Movement were mostly aged between 14 and 24 and largely of middle- and upper-class background. Similarly, in Britain, Barker (1984) found that the average age at which recruits joined the Unification Church was 23, while that of first-generation converts was around 27. About 80 per cent of members were between 19 and 30 and appeared to be mostly of middle-class origin. However, Barker refuted the suggestion that those who might be thought to be most vulnerable – the young, socially isolated, deprived, or those not succeeding in their lives – were particularly attracted.

These findings raise the obvious question of why often affluent and well-educated middle-class young people, with so many worldly opportunities before them, should be particularly attracted