

# **A philosophical assessment of the ‘New Religion’ phenomenon in the global context today**

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## **Abstract**

With the changing culture and abrupt shifts in the socio-economic and political layouts of our globalized world, the religious situation, too, undergoes major changes. The article analyzes the phenomenon of New Religious Movements (NRM) in its current socio-cultural and political context. After defining the guiding terminology relevant to NRM, we proceed to (1) show the historical roots of this new religious trend, (2) expose the existing diversity of NRM, (3) define their characteristic traits, and philosophical assessment of the phenomenon as a whole (rather than its specific beliefs or practices). The article ends with identifying potential social, psychological, and political impacts of the NRM, calling for epistemological humility on the side of philosophers, and critical openness and cautiousness on the side of governmental institutions.

**Key words:** New Religious Movements (NRM), modern age, post-modernism, post-industrial age, epistemology

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## **Terminology Unification and the Global Academic Awareness of the New Religious Phenomenon**

The emergence of religious phenomena in the world today is a topic of widespread discussion in religious research and social management. The assessment of the nature and potential threats/benefits of such movements must necessarily be based on careful philosophical, religious, and social analyses. (Dawson, 2004)

Francoise Champion from Sorbone - Paris Research Center calls these groups minority religious groups, religious groups on the sidelines, mixed groups, or rebelling groups. The reason behind these designations is the fact that they exhibit a considerable level of volatility and fragmentation. They usually consist of fragments of a disintegrated original religion, as most of them arise out of a schism from a normative, traditional religious body. These movements usually do not display religious content, at least not in the way it has been defined in the classical European religious landscape (Champion, 2007: 105-106). Coming from an environment of religious pluralism, American religious scholars call this phenomenon ‘New religious movements’ or ‘Para-religious movements.’ (Bird, Reimer, 1982) This new name is meant to emphasize the contrast between the so-called traditional religions (established world religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc., and their factions and denominations) and the new religious groups. In Japan, the study of the new religious movements is well underway, too. Contemporary Japanese religious researchers offer different interpretations of this ambiguous phenomenon. The ‘common sense’ approach simply points out that these new religions are religious organizations that exist independently from recognized religious organizations in the Japanese environment, such as Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity. This group of researchers focuses on the structural aspects of the new movements. The second group of researchers lays emphasis on chronology. Since these new groups only started appearing recently, they must be classified as ‘new’ or ‘recent.’ There are three possible eras in which to date the emergence of the new religious movements. The first group of researchers dates the beginning of this trend

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to the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), the second to the Tai Sho period (1912-1926), and the third group to the post World War II period. This was the period of promulgation of the new Constitution and the Law on Religious Persons. (Hambrick, 1974; Nobutaka, 2012) Chinese scholars classify this phenomenon in the category of mixed religions. All members of this group are usually labeled as paganism with a clear political and ideological nuance. They are looked upon with suspicion politically. (Lowe, 2001) Academically, researchers typically do not attribute any scientific value to them, denying their potential for intellectual, philosophical edification and/or morality cultivation (Maliavin, 2004: 589-590).

Due to their sectarian and schismatic tendencies, some Western scholars classify the new religious movements as 'sects.' This is a derogatory label suggesting that the phenomenon exhibits dangerous trends and comprises potentially detrimental traits. The existing variations from the original, traditional religions are so fundamental that the new movement/religious sect can no longer be considered an heir to the doctrinal content and practices of the original group. When it comes to the Christian religion, the need to distinguish between 'denominations' and 'sects' is emphasized. In contrast to sects, denominations carry on in the general doctrinal vision of the family of the Christian churches and differ mainly in concrete practices of social and pastoral service, worship, mission engagements, and structure. They also exhibit divergent approaches to the question of what the right relationship between the church group and the state should be. Obviously, opinions on these phenomena differ across the wide array of disciplines that have taken it upon themselves to scrutinize it – social and behavioral scientists, philosophers of religion, sociologists of religion, psychologists of religion, politicians, Church management and administration, theologians, journalists, etc. (Tran, 2011). In their recent study, Pronina (et al., 2018) emphasized the values and needs aspects in the study of the nature and impact of the new religious movements. Values and needs as they manifest in consumption (consumerism) were found to be the most suitable multipurpose criteria for comparing multiple new religious movements or their adepts. The principle of consumption can namely be regarded as a civilizational sign of the information society. To analyze this phenomenon along the said lines, Pronina and Fedotov used sociological concepts of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Sorokin's 'cultural mentalities' concept. (Pronina et al., 2018: 73)

Balagushkin (1996) in his recent article *New religions as a socio-cultural and ideological phenomenon*, confirmed that the classification of these movements as 'new religious movements,' [NRM] i.e., a distinguishable phenomenon from the traditional conceptions of religions, is justified. The NRM comprises the emergence of new, dynamic, unestablished religious movements with low/fluid organizational structure and management, often mystical/esoteric outlook on life, and manipulative psychological techniques to establish the cohesion of the group. Essentially, the concept of a new religious movement eliminates diverse regulations characteristic of the more traditional religious groups: churches, denominations, religious orders, congregations, monasteries, temples, etc. A new morphology of religion is needed, along with a new philosophical assessment of the underlying beliefs, and the hidden metanarrative frameworks. There is a dual semantical meaning of the adjective 'new' relative to these movements, according to Balagushkin. Because the specificity of the new religious phenomenon in particular needs to be considered, it firstly lies in their morphological characteristics, not in their epochality (i.e., temporal situatedness). Moreover, the term itself does not indicate in what sense the 'novelty' of religion must be understood. It can either be from the point of time of their appearance or from the point of view of their characteristics.

Though the above-listed viewpoints diverge significantly in their overall approach, they do converge on some fundamental assessments. This convergence leads us to believe that the phenomenon of new religious movements is not merely a new religion

per se, as compared to the traditional religions, but rather a wholly new, qualitatively different phenomenon that marks a new developmental stage in the history of religions and spirituality. Robert Bellah (2011) situates the development of religion in the context of human biological and socio-cultural evolution. He contradicts the notion that human history began with writing, and argues for the compatibility of evolutionary science and humanistic history. He pays attention to “the behavioral and symbolic aspects of evolution, which build on genetic capacities but are themselves not genetically controlled, as it is there that we will probably find most of the resources for religion — cultural developments from biological beginnings.” (Bellah, 2011: xii) Instead of abstract philosophizing, Bellah considers narrative and ritual to be the bridge between iconic and enactive representations and conceptual representations. In the social space of religious rituals, narratives, and representations, social bonding takes place. As a consequence, the cohesion of the community grows, which further influences the chances of survival of the group. Bellah argues that “ritual is the primordial form of serious play in human evolutionary history — ritual because it is a defined practice that conforms to the terms described [...], rather than religion, which is something that grows out of the implications of ritual in a variety of ways that never leave ritual entirely behind” (Bellah, 2011: 92). Besides storytelling, communal dancing, and individual or group theorizing made the development of religion in its diversity possible. If we build on Bellah’s notion of interrelatedness and complementarity of religious studies, cognitive science, biology (especially evolutionary biology), and evolutionary psychology, we can get a new, more complex picture of the development of these new capacities for the Paleolithic period to the so-called Axial Age (the first millennium BC). It was during this time when the prophets, philosophers and their followers challenged the norms and beliefs of the old aristocracies of the old world. Though these rebels rarely succeeded in creating a new socio-cultural reality that would last, their principle of criticism and dissent persevered. This spirit of criticism, this inner disposition of restlessness and dissent, came to new life with the emergence of the new religious movements in the modern age. Interestingly, the theme of play, which is “a realm of freedom relative to the pressures of the struggle for existence” (Bellah, 2011: 567) converges with the innate desire for free self-expression. “Human play, though also beginning in physical play, can move to the level of aesthetic play in which the full spiritual and cultural capacities of humans can be given free reign,” says Bellah (2011: 568) provokingly.

### **Context-Sensitive Reflections on the New Religious Movements Phenomenon**

The new social space within which these religious movements develop is associated in the West with the ‘postmodern situation.’ Postmodern scholars of religion argue, rather passionately, that religion is the product of social and cultural forces and the related intrapsychic imaginations. (Olson, 2013) Alvin Toffler, the famous 20th century American futurist, adds another layer of interpretation of the phenomenon, arguing that the emergence of a series of religions and new denominations is the result of the largest civilization transformation, as the West entered the post-industrial era of social development.

Before going into identifying and philosophically assessing the characteristic features of new religious phenomena, it is good to recapitulate the differences in the cultural and philosophical layout between modernism and postmodernism. Modernism was the ‘age of reason’ of the French Encyclopedists, the German idealists, and the English empiricists, the new intellectual elite that took it upon itself to reform the medieval European society. (Cao, 2006) While there were major differences between these three main groups of intellectuals, what united them was their common suspicion towards revealed religion (in their era, it was Christianity) in its institutionalized historical manifestations. They wished to establish the future

development of European society on the ground of reason, accessible to all educated people. The church was to lose not only its monopoly on education and civic virtues formation, but also increasingly its public voice. The emerging Protestant groups throughout Europe called for at least a partial separation of church and state and advocated for religious liberties unheard of in the Middle ages. While Roman Catholicism, as it was defined at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), remained a strong force in central and southern parts of Europe, its monopoly was either overthrown or seriously questioned. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) with his Critique of pure reason (1781), Critique of practical reason (1788), and Critique of judgment (1790), as one of the most brilliant and outspoken proponent of the Enlightenment era, laid the foundations for a new understanding of the place of reason and of religion in the society. In summary, he did this by dividing matters of opinion and morals (religion) from matters of science (from Latin *Scientia* – genuine knowledge). Humans were meant to take responsibility for what they know, what they believe in, and how they act by using their rational faculty. This new, enlightened man was then (supposedly) able to transform the world and smash the shackles of destiny that had till then defaulted his life.

The history of European development led to the Age of Enlightenment (18th century) was closely connected to the history of religious wars (17th century). The call for religious tolerance was thus natural aftermath of what had until then been to the bloodiest century in European history. The overall trend that had its roots already in the 17th century, becoming only stronger and more widely accepted in the 18th and 19th centuries, could be defined as the secularization of European society. This trend pushes for a separation of religion from the state to liberate society from ecclesiastic domination. The European secularization is not against religion per se; it merely designates the space where the religious phenomenon is to function to the private spiritual life of an individual. Hence, there is a difference in approach to traditional, institutionalized religion as opposed to an individual's 'religiosity' or 'spirituality.' Needless to say, the new religious movements established their roots towards the end of modernity's secularization, as they benefited from the increased emphasis on individualism and the continuing societal suspicion against institutionalized forms of religion.

Traditional religions were hesitant to give up their position in society and even more reluctant to adjust to the newly emerging social and cultural environment. They failed to understand the principles of dialectical methodology, according to which there are different conceptions, needs, religious forms, linking reality and requirements of life in each particular age. When this happens, an inevitable disconnect exerts its influence between the sacred and profane (secular). Nevertheless, traditional religions enjoyed a relatively stable social status in European societies for much of the 19th and at least until the middle of the 20th century. They were rarely challenged by fundamentally alien outlooks on the nature of religion as a phenomenon in general, and of spirituality (or what should be considered legitimate versions of personal piety) in particular.

The situation began to turn in the period after WWII (especially after the 1950s and 1960s). Experts on culture, philosophers, and religious scholars noticed a shift in the religious landscape that was unexpected and new. A series of religious needs and sentiments arose that could not be explained by the old theory of religions. These phenomena needed a new theory to explain them. Toffler's insightful comment that in the chaos of such new spiritual supermarket seeds of a new 'culture' will sprout that will meet the requirements of times. (Toffler – Toffler, 1995) We have seen this 'new culture' emerge in what has been known as the postmodern times (postmodernity). The historically turbulent industrial culture, dominant and normative in the modern era, gives way to a post-industrial society. (Balagushkin, 1996: 92) Religious issues are seen as intricately interwoven in their social and cultural supporting fabric and

interpreted more through the lens of psychology and culture than philosophy or revelation.

Jean Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), one of the most outspoken commentators on the post-modern situation, reminds us that this new trend is actually not a negation of modernity but a continuation of modernity at another level, in a different way. It is easy to continue thinking and creating new and more appropriate forms to salvage and protect the true values of Modernity: freedom and individual liberty. (Lyotard, 1984) Lyotard grounds the post-modern consciousness model on a new philosophical foundation called the model of reflection. It consists of three aspects: i) Experience and recognition of 'realism' of reality; ii) Experience and recognition of irreparable differences in the human world and society; iii) An attempt to test constituents of reality and differences within our concrete realities (Lyotard, 1984: 25). When talking about the postmodern mind, one of three structural elements of the postmodern situation, Lyotard argues that, in this context, the postmodern mind is a new attempt to awaken to existing risks of temptation. In general, Lyotard defines the post-modern condition as a situation when people are no longer willing to believe in meta-narratives. This incredulity stems from the historical disappointment of humanity with the grand secular meta-narratives of Marxism, Nazism, and even democracy (as Lyotard provokingly suggests). In addition, on a more personal level, though with strong social consequences, the European civilization has experienced a profound disappointment with the Judeo-Christian meta-narrative as it was socially embodied in the institutionalized form of European Christendom. People have thus been left without clear guidance or template as to how to build a prosperous and stable human society. According to Lyotard, these meta-narratives failed because they had failed to understand that culture is constituted by knowledge as competence. "Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color (auditory and visual sensibility), etc. Understood in this way, knowledge is what makes someone capable of forming 'good' denotative utterances, but also 'good' prescriptive and 'good' evaluative utterances" (Lyotard, 1984: 18). He distinguishes between 'scientific' and 'narrative' knowledge. Scientific knowledge requires a teacher who is uniquely qualified to determine what is falsifiable (Popperism) and timeless. "Scientific knowledge is in this way set apart from the language games that combine to form the social bond. Unlike narrative knowledge, it is no longer a direct and shared component of the bond. But it is indirectly a component of it, because it develops into a profession and gives rise to institutions, and in modern societies language games consolidate themselves in the form of institutions run by qualified partners (the professional class)." (Lyotard, 1984: 25) Narrative knowledge, on the other hand, is dominant in culturally less developed or 'traditional' societies but continues to exert its influence in all societal settings. It is founded on storytelling and rituals, i.e., dramatic behavioral patterns that convey meaning. Narrative knowledge does not need scientific (empirical) legitimation because its legitimation is immediate within the narrative itself. The narrative creates its own 'world' of cultural, social, and ethical imaginaries by eluding to the success or failure of a hero, god or mythic figure, using descriptive language and inviting the audience (or, more precisely, the participants) to trust in the narrative. It is the enduring character of a 'timeless' narrative that lends it its potency and credibility. (Lyotard, 1984: 20-22) Narrative knowledge is transmitted across generations by story-telling, following prescribed behavioral patterns, and dramatic reenactments (cultural and religious rituals). To question the validity of this kind of knowledge equals blasphemy. While scientific knowledge must be empirically verified by perfect measurements, the verification of narrative knowledge rests on whether or not the

narrator is trustworthy. The ‘narrator’ here should not be viewed as necessarily an individual person but also the whole tradition and the community that embodies it.

Understanding the differences between the two cultural and philosophical milieus in general and the distinctions between the two kinds of knowledge, in particular, will help us reflect on the phenomenon of new religious movements today. Curiously, despite the fast advancing secularization of Western societies, people seem to have rediscovered religion in the form of new spiritualities as something that gives them meaning or provides some level of satisfaction. Instead of top-down structures of leadership and organization, typical for traditional, institutionalized forms of religion, however, they seem to prefer inner experiences and horizontal relationships with loosely defined leadership models. Alternatively, some plunge to the dangerous adventure of following a leader (a religious ‘narrator’) uncritically, deriving their identity and worth from being obedient followers of a cult. The omnipresence of social networks and immediate means of communication, there are numerous choices of spiritual fulfillment in the supermarket of narrations and rituals. Religion here seems to fulfill the function of meeting the psychological needs of culturally and socially conditioned people who are prone to prefer narrative knowledge to scientific knowledge.

### **The identification of new religious phenomena in the world today**

The logic of identifying new social contexts leads us to assume that the new religious phenomena will be dramatically different from traditional religions. We have identified the following differences so far:

#### ***(1) The content of religious beliefs***

Starting from the postmodern social context, the birth of religious phenomena has initially “broken away” from traditional religious beliefs. (Kondrla – Repar, 2017) If traditional religious beliefs are about a supreme God, obedience in acts of following and believing miracles, and grace that infuses people and guides human societies (morally and spiritually), proponents of the new religious movements believe in personal experiences that are somehow linked to the mysteries of the universe through mystical language, images, and esoteric rituals. Thus, the content of belief is focused more on the individual and his intrapsychic needs and processes, veiled in esoteric images and interpretations. “Contemporary humans give preference to subjective feelings and experiences, they are seekers who like experimenting, and this applies to the domain of religion, too. Market pluralism of religious and spiritual offers contributes to this situation.” (Kardis – Valco, 2018: 104) There is no room for discussing sin in a moral sense that would place personal responsibilities on the ‘believer’ for their own spiritual failures. (Petkovsek, 2019) Instead, if there is a language of sin, then sin is conceived of as a ‘lack of knowledge,’ ‘staying in the dark,’ or ‘weakness of the spirit.’ The human soul is portrayed as fully or partially divine, otherworldly, immortal, etc., with the need to be liberated from its state of ‘unknowing’ and ‘alienation’ from the higher realms. (Urban, 2019) On the other hand, a strong sense of personal responsibility is instilled in the minds of the believers concerning their actual life-choices.

#### ***(2) Reasons behind the increased interest in the new beliefs***

Thomas Molnar observes that “the New Gnosticism, like many another line in contemporary thought, in anthropology, in the study of myths, in structuralism, et cetera, has been largely a reaction against several centuries’ excessive rationalism. Such a reaction is not the first in the history of the West; ... In short, there emerges, and in quite a few instances, reemerges, another tradition that no Church is strong enough today to suppress, incorporate, or publicly refute.” (Molnar, 1983: 132) Molnar argues that “the main prompting element is the observation that the Western way of thinking has sacrificed much of life’s substance to restrictive rationalism centered on the self, whether the orientation is signed by Socrates, Descartes or Kant.”

(Molnar, 1983: 132) The self-chosen seclusion into the realm of esoteric forces which the mind and/or the soul of a gnostic is called to enter is then the new way of fighting excessive intellectualism, technocracy, and consumerism of the present age.

It is also important to admit, as was previously stated in this article, that the European societies are changing in their attitude to the traditional religions that are native in their environment (primarily Christianity but also Judaism). We could see this clearly at the time when the European Constitution was being drafted. "The attitude of the European Community to the question of whether or not to include a reference to God or Christianity in the Preamble to the Constitution revealed the new sentiment. Despite Poland's and Pope John Paul II's appeals, any reference to God or Christian roots were rejected." (Cao, 2006: 70) Also rejected are most of the attempts of the churches to influence laws and regulations in support of some traditional values pertaining to issues such as abortion, euthanasia, divorces, and others. (Tomanek et al., 2019)

### ***(3) Personal engagement and responsibility is promoted***

The phenomenon of New Religious Movements in Western countries promotes trust through personal experience and personal responsibility to face the changing reality of life. According to Françoise Champion: "The new religious movements emphasize personal responsibility, it is not the responsibility of a cult based on respect for the will and dictation of God, but the responsibility of active construction. The great success of reference on reincarnation and karma in most new religious movements is largely linked to ideas of responsibility and encouragement of action that reference is implicitly directed; it is urging of man to face and transform difficulty that destiny will sooner or later encounter" (Champion, 2007: 110).

### ***(4) The characteristics and nature of the faith***

Andrew J. Davis divides the faith of the new era into two distinct forms: (a) philosophical pluralism and (b) phenomenal pluralism. (Albanese, 2012: 366) The cognitive approach of philosophical pluralism is based on secular faith. The proponents of this approach seek social reform according to a model that they consider human and just (based primarily on the principle of equality). The phenomenal pluralism approach, on the other hand, focuses on emphasizing superhuman faith. They are soul-seekers who gather direct new evidence regarding their connection with supernatural forces. Of course, this sublime world of phenomenal pluralism is not supernatural in a traditional religious sense, but it is still clearly understood that the sublime world consists of entities and experiences that normal awareness and common cognitive processes cannot grasp. To summarize, these two approaches have contrasting tendencies: while philosophical pluralism avoids any notions of transcendence in an ontological or even phenomenological level and emphasizes instead the importance of the secular realm, phenomenal pluralism places importance on transcendence, bringing transcendence into the daily lives of the believers. (Luu, 2009: 376-377) Experiences of transcendence, then, allegedly have transformative effects on those who experience them.

### ***(5) Case study on the potentially detrimental effects of the New Religious Movements***

The cult of Truth Aum (Pham, 2005: 89) in Japan, known also as 'Aum Shinrikyo,' provides an interesting case study on the potential dangers of these new movements. It exposes the detrimental practices of linking politics with religion and psychological manipulation. The leaders of this sect intentionally connected religious practices of meditation (Yoga, as well as other, more esoteric practices) with the duties and task of civic life and politics. According to Asahara Shoko (1955-2018), the leader of the Aum Truth School, it is through the practicing of Yoga that the human individual feels special spiritual energy capable of awakening life. When transmitted into one's body and mind, it will lead to further spiritual development and help people to be

enlightened, to be healed, or even to heal others, and it will fill people with joy. This esoteric experience permeated with magic was meant to bring fulfillment to the cult's followers.

The actual doctrine of this cult combines the teachings of the Vajrayana scriptures, the Bible, and other religious and esoteric texts of Asian origin. The community quickly became fully focused on its leader, Asahara Shoko, who in 1992 declared himself to be 'Christ,' the true 'Lamb of God,' meant to enlighten and lead Japan to prosperity and happiness. (Asahara, 1992) As a true Messiah, his mission was to take other people's sins upon himself and to heal others through his innate spiritual powers. All those who would object were considered enemies in an apocalyptic sense – that is, dark powers that cannot be reconciled but must instead be overcome and (ultimately) annihilated. The category of 'enemy' eventually grew to encompass rival Japanese religions, the Dutch, the Brits, the Jews, and many other groups. His apocalyptic vision of the world entailed a doomsday prophecy about the imminent World War III and the end of the old world in a nuclear Armageddon. Though painful and destructive, this course of events was hailed as useful and necessary to cleanse the world of sin and evil and bring about 'human relief.' Asahara became so deeply convinced of his own (conjured up) religious convictions that he organized a series of terrorist attacks, which he actualized with a group of his radicalized followers on March 20, 1995, in Tokyo. The infamous Tokyo subway Sarin gas attacks killed 13 and wounded thousands of people.

#### ***(6) Changes in Epistemology and new approaches in Psychology***

Most scholars concur that the new religious phenomenon is conceptually grounded in a modern version of the Correspondence Theory of Truth. Often associated with metaphysical realism, this new theory argues that "truth is correspondence to, or with, a fact [...]. But the label is usually applied much more broadly to any view explicitly embracing the idea that truth consists in relation to reality, i.e., that truth is a relational property involving a characteristic relation (to be specified) to some portion of reality (to be specified)." (David, 2016) From the perspective of the Correspondence Theory, the universe is a source of countless manifestations of life; at the same time, it has intellectual property that people respect as one guides and protects them on the paths of life. And clearly, the relationship between the universe and the human individual in the phenomenon of the New Religious Movements is not the same as the traditional relationship between God or the Supreme Being and his creatures manifested in religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Instead, the universe of the NRM comprises all life and, at the same time, is present within life. The universe in the concept of the NRM is a form of designing and creating its miniature view within the existence of all things; it covers everything as parts of a homogeneous whole. These new conceptualizations of reality are based on quantum physics – the breakthrough discoveries in physics in the twentieth century. A new spatial conception of material existence is conceivable now thanks to quantum physics, namely the phenomenon of duality and movement between waves and particles. With a new concept of the universe that stems from our modified understanding of reality, a foundation was laid for alternative beliefs, religious expressions, and spiritual practices expressed in mystical language.

Besides physics, new theories of psychology also contribute to the rise of new forms of spiritualities and classifications of religions. Specifically, the theory of Carl G. Jung (1871-1961) on the symbolism of dreams has proved to be essential in mapping the path of ontological discovery. In Western countries, in the 1960s and 1970s, the trend of ego research, self-expression, and the study of personal experience were developed. This has since become the basis for the trend of supra-psychology research, an important 'transition' marker to the study of depth-psychoactive phenomena. At the same time, with the development of psychology and depth-psychology disciplines, the foundations of alternative medical treatment science were developed. Diseases are

no longer treated as isolated problems on the level of biology, chemistry, and physics but more holistically when increased attention is being paid to the patient's psychological well-being. More advanced forms of alternative medicine emphasize the ability of the human psycho-somatic system to heal itself by new habits of thought (meditation), complemented with massage techniques. The idea is to create healing energy to support the positive biological and chemical processes to heal and save a life when diseases (physical and mental) cannot be cured by traditional, modern medicine.

***(7) Influence on the social and cultural systems***

Every social phenomenon which appears on the stage of life is a result of the functioning of a given society. Conversely, any phenomenon that arises in a society has an impact or an effect on that society. This dynamic, dialectic relationship is constitutive for the New religious phenomenon as well.

As we have documented, scholars have identified changing beliefs in the New Religious Movements that led to new practices with unexpected consequences for social life. This change affects socio-cultural values in both positive and negative directions. The magnitude of their socio-cultural impact is given by the fact that the NRM do not only propose new ways of thinking about social issues; they also participate in solving social problems in their own, 'unorthodox' way. It is safe to conclude that, on the one hand, the NRM are consistent with the overall cultural and intellectual development trends; on the other hand, there is a value conflict as well as tensions stemming from the newly emerged layout of authority and leadership structures between the new and traditional models of religious life. Furthermore, social development is linked to personal development. This connection can, at times, be detrimental (as we saw in the case of Asahara Shoko), but it can also provide a valuable resource of positive motivation and local groups' cohesion. Spiritual development techniques are complemented with psychological development to boost personal resilience, perseverance, courage, and positive thinking. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between a psychological self-help approach and a spiritual/religious one. A good example of such a 'semi-religious' method can be found in the Japanese Tea Ceremony or certain kinds of 'Karate Reverence/Worship' ceremonies. These methods are developed with the aim to strengthen human health, induce psychological and spiritual balance, and cultivate high moral standards in the participating individuals. (Institute of Social Science Information, 1998: 130-131)

The new balance that is established on the personal level has its positive repercussions on the social level as well as on the level of ecology. A healthy communal life can only be established in a sustainable way in a socio-natural environment that is ethically and ecologically healthy. Those who pursue this goal will necessarily be met with opposition as they disturb the 'balance' established by previous generations. However, "Ecosystems have due to their properties the adaptability and flexibility to meet these changed conditions [and the ensuing tensions] and still maintain the system far from thermodynamic equilibrium. The disturbances call for new and creative solutions for life to survive. Disturbances may therefore also be beneficial in the long term for ecosystems" (Nielsen et al., 2019: 250) To cultivate such inner disposition in human individuals, the New Religious Movements use both narrative and ritual forms. Some characteristics from the religious environment can be found in the new type of political parties and NGOs (such as the Green Party or the Green Peace Organization). The followers of the New Era movement protect animal rights to create ecological balance and coordinate with businesses to provide eco-friendly products.

Besides cultivating more potent environmental values, some of the NRM promote values that enhance the well-being of the human community in other aspects of our social living. The modern Feminist Movement and the numerous movements

promoting world peace can serve as examples here. While these movements are not to be regarded as religious in and of themselves, their causes have been picked up by the members of the NRM. Members of some of the NRM spoke on forums about cooperation instead of confrontation within our human interactions. They lectured about the feminine side of men and equal rights for women, to provide only a few examples, and to engage in other social activities. The area of economic development is also included in the discourse on the social impacts of NRM. Some of these groups have been known to promote new forms of capitalism based on the logic of the development of production factors. This is underscored by Francoise Champion when he writes, "it is clear that the capitalist spirit is not simply a force that chokes charismatic religions; on the opposite, the form and structure of capitalism in different forms adapted, arranged, and directed to benefit for the vast majority of charismatic religious movements." (Champion, 2007: 114)

In addition to these well-regarded social impacts of the NRM, there are some traits that are viewed with more suspicion due to their esoteric nature, such as the affinity of some of these groups to animism. Interestingly, their characteristic 'animistic slant' is not about sanctifying the earthly elements or temporal life; it is rather to explain them in a mystical and spiritualistic spirit. In this view, the application of supernatural powers that are present in this universe as all-permeating forces, as well as in the afterlife, have to potency to solve all problems of the human, mundane realm. This will allegedly allow humanity to escape the imminent socio-cultural crisis. In a way, therefore, the NRM have a prophetic, critical function when it comes to evaluating the current state of affairs of our societies. They tend to reject social reality as it is, in order to imbue it with genuine social and cultural values. For them, the current world development cannot produce a cure of its own accord and powers.

New, so-called 'spiritual healing' methods are promoted, and alleged successes of this method are widely broadcasted. Healing is usually facilitated by the power of imagination and autosuggestion. Another popular method is the 'Shamanistic' method. This method usually uses a mental journey to acquire power and manipulate it. Those who practice this method aim to visit different worlds according to their notions: The lower world populated by powerful animals and guardian spirits; the medium world is the earthly realm, which is visited in ecstasy; and then there is the upper realm where the Shaman finds spiritual masters. Thus, the mind and its imagination rest at the heart of the ritual. As these rituals and shared practices are conducted by large groups of participants (either individually or collectively), which constitutes a significant social force. The so-called 'New Agers' who believe in reincarnation, for example, comprise 20-25% of the US population. Of course, this is a very loosely organized group, and not everyone is equally committed to following this religious movement.

With such a concept, at least two trends can be distinguished that are presently influencing the social and cultural fabrics of our societies. According to the first trend, followers are called to seek communion with the mystical realm of spirits and gods (or divine beings in general). Some of these may have a distinctly Christian flavor, adhering doctrinally to the Trinitarian Christian creed but differing significantly in the forms of piety and institutional structure (or the lack thereof). This trend is essentially represented by religious groups from North America and Western Europe: the 'Meditative Hippies,' 'Jesus Revolution,' 'Opium Revolution,' etc. There might also be the tendency on the side of believers to abandon their homes, possessions, jobs, etc. in order to concentrate on waiting for the day of salvation. Another type of extreme expression that has been documented is violence against secular society. From the perspective of this type of the NRM, the world is about to end, so destroying the world to build an ideal world is a noble endeavor, sanctioned by a higher order being. "The cult leaders revert to terrorist acts after their political plans fail. They create social hatred and, through radio stations located in Russia and Japan, spread their apocalyptic propaganda enthusiastically. In March 1995, the AUM cult leader let his

followers spread poison on the subway line in Tokyo, which caused chaos and dread, resulting in 12 deaths and 5,500 injuries” (Tran, 2011: 606). Other ‘toxic’ religious groups (sects) established secret societies where the unlimited authoritarian rule was practiced, as was the case with David Khoresh sect. Khoresh forced men and women to live separately, pray daily, and report ideologically incompatible activity. He used physical force and psychological manipulation and terror to achieve total compliance. The People’s Temple sect used the intimidation of body and mind as a tactic to indoctrinate its members. They collected the members’ passports and restricted their freedom of movement to prevent believers from running away from the community (Tran, 2011: 609).

Some groups belonging to the NRM are actively undermining the authority of the government. Their zeal and devotion often cannot be distinguished from pure fanaticism. Part of the reason for such utter dedication is their apocalyptic perspective on the world. Within this apocalyptic framework, the cult members take it upon themselves to fight against the forces of darkness that had taken over the world – politically, socially, economically, environmentally, or morally. This vision of the world sometimes prompts them to militarize themselves and fight actively against the existing social structures and the government.

However, it is difficult to monitor the activities of the NRM and counter these potential threats due to the absence of clear institutional structures and designated places of gatherings and worship. Religious ceremonies are often held spontaneously, out in nature, or in people’s homes. Some of their practices, rituals, and ceremonies attract considerable attention and may be viewed as captivating by outside observers, prone to believe in magic and desiring a deeper, spiritual fulfillment.

## **Conclusion**

The high level of volatility and complex forces that influence the development of the world today compel us to carefully consider the potential benefits as well as threats of new social, cultural, political, and, above all, religious movements. Religion is, as some believe, at the heart of culture and, as such, has an immense power to motivate people to do good or evil. This is true for the phenomenon of New Religious Movements as well. Their attractiveness has to do with the basic principles of human psychology (on the intrapersonal level), as well as with overall changes in culture and society. Our post-industrial and post-modern world favors alternative movements, structures of leadership, ways of expressing one’s needs and feelings. The spiritual hunger of technocratically inclined individuals adds fuel to this curious cultural situation, as do the numerous problems that our societies face today, especially corruption. (Cao, 2020) Philosophically speaking, new discoveries in quantum physics open new ways of understanding the very nature of our reality. No longer can we explain our world mechanistically, or even using some later models that tried to complement Newton’s mechanics. These discoveries have philosophical consequences, not just the economic ones. Moreover, we observe fatigue in the European and North American societies from the traditional political and religious solutions to communal life. The situation is ripe, therefore, for new approaches to emerge. However, as we have shown in this article, new solutions need not necessarily be better solutions. The vague, philosophical-mystical underpinning of the New Religious Movements is epistemologically ambiguous. On the hand, it offers new perspectives on the reality of the world in its physical and social dimension, as well as in the realm of the human psyche. On the other hand, it takes us to uncharted waters of human fiction, spiritual enthusiasm, and potential manipulation (including self-delusion). If connected with political ambitions or, worse yet, an apocalyptic vision of the world happenings, these movements may constitute a serious threat to our societies. (Nguyen et al., 2019)

The situation will be challenging to solve because the novelty of our situation limits our ability to use past resources as inspiration. As Bellah warns us, it is hard to bring key axial thinkers like Plato, Buddha, Confucius, and the biblical prophet Amos into our current discourse. This is especially true when it comes to the contents of their reflections. However, the affective and procedural aspects observable in the NRM might bring some inspiration. One example is the role of play in the cultivation of human mutuality and moral vision. Bellah notices this fact and points out that Plato “took play very seriously as a way in which men and gods interact. For him the freedom of play was linked to another realm where necessity does not reign” (Bellah, 2011: 585). From this Bellah discusses axial “utopias,” arguing that the Confucian utopia was “the expression of ritual,” whereas for Plato, “the vision of the good itself as a kind of ritual” prevails. In Israel, the “ritual prescriptions of the Torah” were binding, and for the Buddhist utopia, meditation was central (Bellah, 2011: 587). Bellah’s conclusion is that axial societies were the first to develop “universal” ideas about ethics, about human equality, and that in the contemporary world, we have to take seriously differing religious views, without (he claims) slipping into relativism. He remains committed to what Thomas McCarthy calls “dialogue across differences” and cautions (following Wilfred Cantwell Smith) that different religions ask and answer different questions, and that it is a serious error to dismiss a religion because “we think the other traditions are answering our questions” (my emphasis), and answering them “less well than our own” (Bellah, 2011: 605). Together with Bellah, therefore, we wish to argue for an ‘ecumenical openness’ (understood broadly) and epistemological humility when it comes to dealing with and assessing heterodox ideas and religious beliefs and practices. A critical vigilance should be the appropriate stance that governments, politicians, as well as academicians should adopt.

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