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Review by Wanda Alberts

The book „Cults and New Religious Movements. A Reader” edited by Lorne L. Dawson provides a selection of articles by historians, sociologists and psychologists of religion, mainly from North America or England, which have been published before in different contexts. In line with the policy of the series of which this book is a part (Blackwell Readings in Religion) the expected readership comprises undergraduate students, as well as scholars and other interested readers.

The main purpose of the compilation of articles is to provide reliable scientific information about new religions in order to refute common public prejudice against them. This intention runs as a red thread through the whole book, most notably in the editorial parts, but it is also mirrored in the selection of topics. Despite some remaining problems (in fact, each of the three words that make up the term could be questioned) the editor prefers the term “new religious movement” over other alternatives as for example “cult” which took on a pejorative connotation, not the least because of the activities of the “anti-cult-movement” in the United States.

The book consists of eight sections with two (and in one case three) chapters each. In every section there is an introduction by the editor. After the first section on the study of new religious movements, in which the social scientific approach to the topic is outlined, there

follow sections on the nature of new religious movements (II), new religious movements in historical and social context (III), joining new religious movements (IV), the “brainwashing” controversy (V), violence and new religious movements (VI), sex and gender issues and new religious movements (VII), and new religious movements and the future (VIII).

Even though most new religious movements (NRMs) differ very little from what is commonly understood by religion, as James A. Beckford states in chapter 2, Dawson claims that “the controversy surrounding ‘cults’ makes the study of NRMs unlike the study of these other conventional religions” (5). In contrast to the study of other religious phenomena, Dawson regards a scientific response to issues raised in public – above all by the media – in connection with NRMs as the task for the researcher, out of “a belief in letting the record of reliable research speak for itself.” (1/2) With all respect for the unquestioned importance of the latter, I do not agree with the editor on the exceptional status of the study of NRMs within the study of religions. Public interest in religious phenomena varies a lot. In the US and Europe public interest in NRMs is perhaps already beyond its peak. It is one of the important tasks of the study of religions in general to provide reliable information about issues raised in the public (and thus, possibly to refute common prejudice), but not only with respect to NRMs.

The first section including chapters by Eileen Barker and James A. Beckford can be regarded as the methodological prolegomena for the scientific study of NRMs. Keeping in mind that all accounts of new religious movements are secondary constructions of social reality, Barker in chapter 1 “The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!” compares the interests, aims, methods, selected and systematically excluded data, and modes of communication in the production of these constructions. She defends the methods of the social sciences (among them openness to criticism and empirical testing, as well as the use of the comparative method) as the basis of a more balanced and useful account of NRMs than those of their competitors, as for example the NRMs themselves, the anti-cult-movement, the media, the law or therapists. Barker argues for a more active role on the part of the researcher in promoting their accounts of reality.

In the following three sections the methodology already outlined is applied to general questions concerning NRMs. In section II attempts to group NRMs according to their family resemblances are presented. In the first reading in this section, “Three Types of New Religious Movement”, Roy Wallis differentiates between three attitudes towards the world (rejecting, affirming, and accommodating) in NRMs. Those different attitudes in his view most fully account for the differences in the organisation and behaviour of these groups. In chapter 4, “Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models” William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark provide models of religious innovation (psychopathology, entrepreneur, and subculture-evolution), which might be “woven together by a complex network of social changes” (69).

The two chapters in section III clearly demonstrate the North American focus of the book. The readings selected for a study of the historical and social context of NRMs comprise a chapter by Philip Jenkins on religions in North America in the 19th century and an account of spiritual life in North America since the 1960s by Robert Wuthnow. Notwithstanding the important contribution of these two articles to the study of the historical and social context of NRMs in North America, a selection of articles including information about other countries as well might have productively contributed to the broadening of the scope of the whole compilation.

Dawson presents the controversial issue of “brainwashing” in a section with three chapters, one upholding the brainwashing thesis, one criticising the latter and one offering a broader interpretive framework for an interpretation of the issues at stake. In the first reading “The Process of Brainwashing, Psychological Coercion, and Thought Reform” an exponent of the brainwashing-thesis, the American psychologist Margaret T. Singer, discusses different models of “thought reform” which she regards as a strategy being employed in many cults. While reading Singers article, it is well worth keeping the editors’ advice in mind to think about what evidence in terms of reliable research is given by Singer to support her specific claims. By social scientific standards the evidence for the brainwashing hypothesis and the asserted extent of the use of “thought reform” (“Leaders of cults and groups using thought-reform have taken in and controlled millions of persons to the detriment of their welfare.” Singer, 147) is in fact not quite convincing. Single examples of manipulations of people do not justify general claims about “brainwashing” in many cults. The reservations that many scholars of religion have about the brainwashing-thesis are summarised in the chapter “A Critique of ‘Brainwashing’ Claims About New Religious Movements” by James T. Richardson. His main points of criticism include the misrepresentation of earlier scholarly work on the processes developed in Russia, China and the Korean POW situation; the ideological biases of brainwashing theorists; the limited research base of the classical models; the ignorance of predisposing characteristics and volition, of large research traditions and other explanations, as well as a disregard for the relatively small number of people involved in NRMs. In the third contribution in this section, “Constructing Cultist ‘Mind Control’”, Thomas Robbins shows that the question of brainwashing, if placed in a broader interpretive framework, is to a great extent a matter of perspective. The same phenomenon can be regarded as intense religious commitment from one point of view while being discarded as abuse or “brainwashing” from another. Robbins concludes that a “shift of focus will be necessary to transcend the inconclusive psychologism of debates over brainwashing”(177).

The book clearly succeeds in providing reliable scientific information as a groundwork for overcoming public prejudice about NRMs, as for example in the sections on sex and gender, violence (including readings on the incidents of the [murder-] suicides of Jonestown and the Solar Temple Movement) and joining NRMs. In the latter, for instance, the common stereotype of the joiners as social losers or naive souls lacking genuine experience and being

manipulated by exploiting leaders is unmasked as quite inaccurate. Even though patterns of how and to some extent even why many people come to join NRMs can be identified, there are of course always exceptions, as Dawson points out in chapter 7, "Who joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?". Dawson's editorial remark that "great care must be taken in making generalizations" (113) could be regarded as the mission statement for the whole book.

In the first reading of the final section on NRMs and the future, "Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model" Rodney Stark develops criteria for the success or failure of NRMs in terms of growth, social influence, geographical distribution, increased material assets, and legitimacy. He provides 10 theoretical propositions about factors for the success of NRMs, derived from results of the study of NRMs of the recent past.

The last chapter, written by the editor himself and Jenna Hennebry, "New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space" mirrors the somewhat apologetic ductus of the editing of the book. It is again written to counter public concern, in this case particularly to counter fears that "destructive" cults might recruit many young people via the internet. The authors' answer to the question "Is there something to worry about?" (273) is that there isn't any particular "threat posed by 'cults' on the Internet" (283), since the content of the web pages isn't very different from more traditional forms of religious publication and broadcasting and, furthermore, there is no evidence that internet users are more prone to convert to NRMs than other people. Unfortunately, the statistics about the use of the internet used in this article date back to 1997 and appear now rather outdated. Presumably, referring to Canada or the United States it would be impossible to maintain today, for example, that "the Internet is still only used, with any regularity, by a relatively small percentage of the population" (271). A look at the recent developments concerning NRMs and the Internet would be interesting, perhaps also with respect to other aspects than recruitment.

The book is very useful for students, scholars of different disciplines, and lay readers to get an idea of the scientific response to publicly debated issues about new religions. Furthermore, with bibliographies at the end of each article, it also provides an excellent starting point for further study. In order to obtain a deeper understanding of new religions and related issues it is, however, advisable to complement the reading not only (as the editor suggests) with studies on single new religious movements, but also with comparative studies paying more attention to new religious movements in other parts of the world than North America or Europe.

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