The history of religions is one of continual change. Each religion changes over time, new religions appear, and some older traditions disappear. Times of rapid social change are particularly likely to spawn new religious movements, for people seek the security of the spiritual amidst worldly chaos. In the period since World War II, thousands of new religious groups have sprung up around the world. In sub-Saharan Africa, there are now over 7,000 different religions; every Nigerian town of several thousand people has up to fifty or sixty different kinds of religion. In Japan, an estimated thirty percent of the population belongs to one of hundreds of new religious movements. Imported versions of Eastern traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, have made many new converts in areas such as North America, Europe, and Russia, where they are seen as “new religions.” Internet websites and social-networking sites have greatly increased the speed with which new religious movements can evolve and spread.

To move into a new religious movement may be a fleeting experience or it may signal a deep change in one’s life. In religion, as in other life commitments such as marriage, there are potential benefits in dedication and obedience. Many religions, including the largest world religions, teach self-denial and surrender as cardinal virtues that help to vanquish the ego and allow one to approach ultimate reality. The question for a spiritual person is where to place one’s faith.

Social context of new religious movements

New religious movements are often popularly referred to as “cults” or “sects.” These words have specific, neutral meanings: a cult arises outside other traditions, while a sect is a splinter group or a subgroup associated with a larger tradition. Both words have sometimes been used imprecisely and pejoratively to distinguish new religions from older ones, each of which already claims to be the best or only way. The label “new religious movement” seems more neutral and is widely used, particularly in academic circles, to avoid such negative connotations. However, the word “new” is itself imprecise, for many of these groups have a rather lengthy history and have survived long after the death of the original founder.
Much of the research into new religious movements has been undertaken by sociologists, for they are interested in the processes by which new religions arise, attract members, deal with the death of their founders, and then organize themselves into continuing religious traditions that may gradually enter the social mainstream. Several twentieth-century sociological theories looked at the difference between “churches” and “sects.” If seen as ends of a continuum, “churches” are more established religious traditions; sects or cults are newer and more marginal. In the typology suggested by Professors Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, a church typically accepts and accommodates itself to the society in which it operates. A sect, by contrast, rejects its social environment as “worldly” and “unbelieving,” that is, opposed to its beliefs. Sects usually have previous ties to a religious organization but have broken off from it, often in the attempt to return to what they perceive as its pristine original form. Cults are independent religious traditions, but they may also be in conflict with the surrounding society.

According to Stark and Bainbridge’s typology, cults can be further defined by the degree to which they influence their followers’ relationship to society. What they call “audience cults” do not require conversion, and allow their followers great flexibility. They may sample many religious movements and attend workshops here and there, making their own choices about what to believe and do. New Age groups tend to fall in this category. California-based Dr. Deepak Chopra, for instance, has such a large following that over ten million copies of his books such as *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* have been sold in English and his workshops on subjects such as physical healing, emotional wellbeing, and spiritual growth are often sold out. However, those who practice his teachings based on ancient Indian ayurvedic principles plus psychological “self-knowledge” do not become members of a distinct religious group.

“Client cults” offer some kind of service, usually some kind of therapy. Involvement with the organization may become deeper and more socially defining over time. Scientology, which is based on the writings of L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), is considered such a group. The initial agenda is therapeutic: “auditing” in order to clear the mind of the negative effects of past experiences and past lives. But once this process begins, clients learn of more complex levels of involvement, and other members may become their primary social group. Auditing often leads to membership in the Church of Scientology. This institution is based on Hubbard’s idea that the mind is directed by what he called the *thetan* (self). Hubbard taught that the *thetan* is trapped in the material world but that its freedom can be obtained through a gradual process of detachment. Step by step, following precise directions, the *thetan* can move up “The Bridge” to “total freedom.” Higher levels of involvement in this process are said to confer secret wisdom, or gnostis, and the freed “Operating Thetan” begins to have out-of-body experiences. “Advanced Organizations” have been established to offer these higher levels of experience,
culminating in the “Sea Org,” which consists of members who have committed themselves to work for Scientology by signing the “billion-year contract.” They move to one of the Sea Org centers throughout the world, where they undertake a disciplined program of work and study and attempt to abide by a strict code of conduct, “to help get ethics in on this planet and the universe, which is the basic purpose of the Sea Org.” Those reaching this Sea Org level—which has been compared to monastic orders in Christianity or Buddhism—are a small subset of the reportedly millions of clients who register for the auditing sessions with Scientology. The organization thus remains primarily what Stark and Bainbridge call a “client cult.”

What Stark and Bainbridge call a “cult movement” is a full-fledged organization that requires conversion and does not allow dual allegiances to other organizations. Some offer a total way of life, with community-based lodging and work as well as group worship. Commitment to this way of life ranges from partial, with people still involved with family and friends outside the movement, to total, in which they are largely cut off from the wider social environment. Groups anticipating an imminent time of great changes in the world may take this path of separation.

When members of a new religious movement anticipate that the end times or new world order are coming soon, they tend to be regarded as eccentrics by the rest of their society. To maintain their faith, they may isolate themselves from mainstream society and try to prepare for the coming changes. Alternatively, those who anticipate the end of the present world may accept social scorn and try to share their prophecies with others in order to save them from the anticipated coming destruction or prepare them for the new world order.

The expectation of major world changes appears in many established religions, including Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and some indigenous religions. Hindus, for instance, anticipate that the current depraved age of Kali Yuga will be followed by the return of Sat Yuga (when dharma will again prevail). This anticipation leads periodically to the formation of movements which preach that the time of great changes is imminent. In Christianity, the last book in the Bible, Revelation, predicts an apocalypse, or dramatic end of the present world. Revelation foretells a titanic war at Armageddon between the forces of Satan and the forces of God, with great destruction, followed by the millennium, a 1,000-year period of special holiness in which Christ rules the earth. Some nineteenth-century Christians developed the idea of the rapture, using Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4:17) to say that Christians would be caught up in clouds to meet Jesus when he returned to earth. This idea has been revived in our times, with phenomena such as a series of novels entitled Left Behind, which were published around the turn of the millennium, purporting to describe the end.
times in which true believers are taken instantly to heaven, leaving behind a chaotic world in which the Secretary-General of the United Nations turns out to be the Antichrist. Apocalyptic expectations were rife on the eve of the year 2000. Some groups anticipated a final occasion for enlightenment in 2012, because the ancient Mayan calendar ends on December 21, 2012.

UFO cults have added their own anticipations of imminent changes. Raëlians, for instance, believe that wise extraterrestrial beings collectively called “Elohim” (an ancient plural name for the supreme deity as “mighty ones,” occurring in the Hebrew Bible) came here and created life on earth. With scientific advances we will soon be able to travel to other planets and, like Elohim, create new life. The Raëlians’ goal is to prepare humanity for an imminent encounter with the extraterrestrials, an event that a French Raëlian says is “likely to be the most important event in human history.”3

**Charismatic leadership**

Formation of new religious movements often begins in the same way as many established religions: A charismatic figure emerges who develops a dedicated following of people who regard him or her as their spiritual teacher (such as Buddha), prophet (such as Muhammad), or messiah (such as Jesus). Huge movements have developed around such beings who are thought to be divinely inspired. From time to time, new figures arise and attract a lot of followers, such as the contemporary spiritual leaders Rev. Sun Myung Moon and Mata Amritanandamayi. They have developed far-flung and diversified service and propaganda organizations, which may help their movements to survive their own eventual physical deaths.

Sociological theory suggests that after those groups who are able to routinize the leader’s charisma into the authority of a religious institution survive, and may later produce other charismatic persons. When an institution has grown or allied with other similar institutions to encompass a large part of the civil community, it may begin behaving more like what Stark and Bainbridge call a “church” rather than a “sect.” In general, churches take responsibility for the larger community and respond to its needs; sects take responsibility for themselves and for their own members.

**Unification movement**

The Unification Movement was founded by the charismatic leader Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012), who proclaimed himself and his second wife, Hak Ja Han, to be Messiahs. Moon was born in 1920 in what is now North Korea into a family of farmers. At that time, Christians met underground, hiding first from the Japanese occupation authorities and then from the communists. Many of the Christian churches had strong messianic expectations. Moon’s parents converted to Christianity, and around Easter 1935, while he was praying in the mountains, Moon said that Jesus appeared to him in a vision. Jesus reportedly told him that it had not been God’s desire that he be crucified, for his mission on earth was left unfinished. By Moon’s account, Jesus asked him to complete the task of establishing God’s kingdom on earth.

To this end, Moon developed the “Unification Principle,” according to which God created the universe in order to manifest true love, and the human family is considered the primary institution for the growth of love. Based on
spiritual and moral education in the family, people are to live for the sake of others in all situations. However, according to Moon’s theology, humans do not live according to God’s design; selfishness prevails in human relationships and in relationships between ethnic groups and nations. The misuse of love through illicit sex has led to the “human Fall.” From the time of Adam and Eve, false love has been passed down from generation to generation, infecting the whole human race.

Rev. Moon proposed that God has been grieving ever since the Fall of His children, Adam and Eve, but that, as the “Third Adam,” Moon brought Restoration of the ideal, partially restored by Jesus (the “Second Adam”):

*God is almighty. It was not due to any shortcoming or lack of ability that He has been imprisoned in great pain and has endured immense suffering behind the scenes of history. Rather, there are provisions in the Principle of Restoration, which He has not been free to disclose, that called him to wait with forbearance until Adam and Eve’s positions, lost at the human Fall, were recovered through the appearance of the perfected “Second Adam.”*

Moon began to teach publicly in North Korea, where communist leaders were seeking to quash religious activity. He was arrested, tortured, and thrown into a snowdrift. After his followers nursed him back to health, he continued preaching in public, was arrested again, and sentenced to hard labor in a concentration camp. Moon was liberated when American forces bombed the prison.

In the 1970s, the Unification Church staged a series of well-publicized rallies in the United States and saw a rapid growth in membership. Middle-class youths put aside their careers, gave up their worldly possessions, broke off from their girlfriends and boyfriends, and devoted themselves to the religious path. They saw their sacrificial and ascetic way of life as a rejection of the materialistic and hedonistic American lifestyle. However, alarmed parents accused the church of brainwashing their adult children. The church was viewed with suspicion by the established Christian churches and vilified by the political left because of its anti-communist activities. In 1982, Rev. Moon
was subjected to criminal prosecution and imprisoned over a tax liability of $7,300, but the ruling was criticized by the National Council of Churches as a denial of religious liberty and a “miscarriage of justice” since several other religions could have been found equally guilty, and the ruling was overturned by the Supreme Court.

Despite controversy and mockery, the Unification Movement began engaging in large-scale international activities reportedly designed to transform the world. For instance, the Unification-sponsored Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace and the Religious Youth Service have created international inter-religious dialogues among scholars of religion and political leaders, and service projects in many countries. Such expensive projects are financially supported by members’ door-to-door sales and their establishment of business companies such as industrial-scale fishing ventures. The Unification Church has become extremely financially successful and even wields some political power; for instance, it is the owner of a major Washington, D.C., newspaper, the Washington Times. It claims to be getting one million hits a week on its website.

A unique aspect of the movement’s work is massive wedding ceremonies in which thousands of couples matched by the movement or already-wed couples wanting to dedicate themselves to “live for the sake of others” and “create an ideal family which contributes to world peace” were simultaneously “blessed” by Rev. and Mrs. Moon. With Rev. Moon having announced himself as the “Third Adam,” Unificationists view these mass weddings as a movement to create one human family, with couples of all races and nationalities being “engrafted” onto “God’s lineage of true love.” Rev. and Mrs. Moon also undertook global speaking tours, giving the same prepared speeches in many countries to announce that they were the True Parents of all humankind.

In addition to Rev. Moon’s self-avowed transmissions of revelations from Jesus, it is also said that Mrs. Moon’s deceased mother and Rev. and Mrs. Moon’s son, who died in a car crash, are assisting Unificationists from the spirit world, through the help of a medium. Hundreds of thousands of members have participated in workshops in which people cite miraculous physical healings and visions of spirits leaving their bodies. The spirits are then said to be given training in the Unification Principle and duly “blessed.” There are also liberation ceremonies for ancestors and even historical “infamous personages,” such as Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin. A Unification spokesman reports that they have been “blessed as the representatives of all wicked people, thereby opening the gate for the ‘liberation of Hell.’”

Among his many projects to “build the kingdom of Heaven on earth,” Rev. Moon bought and renovated an inner-city university on the seashore in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The University of Bridgeport now serves an ethnically diverse body of students from eighty countries and specializes in career-oriented programs. Like the participants in other projects founded by Rev. Moon, these students are not typically Unification members. Moon’s charismatic leadership was kept in the background. At conferences such as the Assembly of the World’s Religions, the World Media Conference, and the International Conference on the Unity of Sciences, he or his wife appeared perhaps only once to present his philosophy, and many in attendance would not agree with it.

Rev. Moon preached unification, but not in the sense of ignoring all differences. His theology and such aspects as his announcement of support from the spirit world—including the 2001 claim that both Jesus and Muhammad have recognized Moon as the Messiah—antagonize Christian churches and Islam.
In addition to being attacked by Christian anti-cult groups, the Unification movement as it matures is meeting encountering issues common to the evolution of religious groups. Problems became evident concerning succession as Rev. Moon tried to organize the future of his movement. In the mid-1990s, when the Moons’ eldest son demonstrated his interest in media and communications rather than church leadership, their next living son—Preston—was trained and given leadership of much of the movement’s activities. In 2008, when the eldest son passed away at a young age, Preston expected to lead the movement as a whole, including its spiritual dimensions. Instead, the Moons appointed their youngest son, Sean (Hyung Jin Nim), to represent the position and guidance of “True Parents.” Now staff and members are split between those loyal to Preston and those who recognize Sean as officially representing the “True Parents’” ongoing direction. The resulting friction within the “Holy Family” has had a wrenching effect on the movement, and may caused problems now that Rev. Moon has passed away.

Sathya Sai Baba

Another charismatic leader with a huge following was Sathya Sai Baba of India (1926–2011). International crowds coming for his darshan (contact with the divine) became so large that spaces were allotted according to a lottery system.

Sathya Sai Baba claimed to be the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, a saint who was greatly loved by people of all religions, and furthermore claimed that he was an Avatar, an earthly manifestation of the Divine. According to biographical material written by devotees, his mother believed he was divinely conceived when a “big ball of blue light” rolled toward her and seemed to enter her body. When the boy was fourteen, he was reportedly stung by a large scorpion, after which he went into silence broken occasionally by spiritual songs and discourses, weeping or laughing. Spiritual phenomena, his personal magnetism, and his claims of being Shirdi Sai Baba drew people to
him. His center in Puttaparthi became a world pilgrimage center including a massive ashram, an educational system from primary schools to a free accredited university with three campuses, a museum of world religions, a planetarium, indoor and outdoor stadiums, free super-speciality hospitals, a railway station, and an airport. Sathya Sai Baba gave darshan daily to hordes of followers, moving among them to accept letters and materialize objects such as rings, necklaces, watches, or sacred ash in his hand to give them; he would choose some for private interviews about matters in their personal lives. His followers also claim that he manifested things in their homes far away, such as turmeric powder, holy ash, holy water, Shiva lingams, fruits, and gems. Many other miracles are attributed to him, such as controlling the weather, changing the color of his clothing, disappearing physically, appearing in two places at the same time, bringing a dead man back to life, and healing people. Such apparent spiritual magic is not unique in India, but it added to his charismatic appeal. He refused to allow scientists to study his materializations of objects, so he was subject to accusations that he was simply a magician. He himself said that the miracles were trivial compared to “my glory and majesty, as a mosquito is in size and strength to the elephant upon which it squats.” On another occasion he said, “I teach that no distinction should be made between the names Rama, Krishna, Ishwara, Sai—for they are all My names.”

Despite attributing Godhead to himself, Sathya Sai Baba did not claim to be starting a new religion, but rather preached the simple universal message of truth, righteousness, nonviolence, love, and peace. His Sai Organization has study circles around the world and runs value-based free schools, medical institutions, digital radio networks, and large-scale projects to provide drinking water to drought-prone areas of India. Its centers also encourage their members to provide selfless service in their communities through projects such as food banks, feeding of the homeless, tree planting, park cleanups, medical camps, blood donation, and collecting old spectacles to be donated to the poor. Sathya Sai Baba’s reputation for charitable work was nonetheless marred after his death by the discovery of millions of dollars worth of cash, gold, and silver in his private residence.

Offshoots of older religions

Since newer offshoots of older religions are often sufficiently different from the parent religion to be considered new religious movements—whether they regard themselves as such or not—we will examine three contemporary examples below: the Mormon Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Radhasoami.

Mormon Church

The chief feature of the Mormon Church, more formally known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that distinguishes it from the many variations of mainstream Christianity is that Mormons believe not only in the Bible but also in another scripture, *The Book of Mormon*. Mormons believe that in 1822, under angelic guidance, Joseph Smith found the book in New York State, engraved on golden plates. *The Book of Mormon* purports to be the account of several of the lost tribes of Israel, who crossed the ocean to become the ancestors of the American Indians, and the appearance of Jesus to them in the Americas after his death and resurrection. Mormon is one
of the faithful who is believed to have survived tribal conflict and managed to write down the teachings about Jesus in the Americas for posterity. In 3 Nephi of *The Book of Mormon*, for instance, it is written that Jesus appeared to the Nephites as “a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them.” Jesus reportedly gave them teachings very similar to the Sermon on the Mount from the New Testament, and urged them to practice baptism by immersion and not to quarrel over doctrine.

Convinced of the authenticity of *The Book of Mormon*, followers of Joseph Smith moved from one place to another to escape persecution and try to build a “New Jerusalem,” “the land of Zion.” With great effort, they built a great city in Illinois which they called Nauvoo, Hebrew for “beautiful place,” and began to develop some political power, but then Joseph Smith was assassinated by angry area residents. In the struggle for succession, several separate groups of Latter-day Saints developed, the largest of which was led by Brigham Young (1801–1877) to Salt Lake City, Utah, to build “Zion in the Wilderness” and restore what the Mormons consider true Christianity, as opposed to the apostasy (abandonment of principles) which they feel characterizes the Christian churches.

The Mormon Church now numbers thirteen million followers worldwide. Its members control great material wealth and also exercise considerable political influence in the United States, especially in Utah. The Mormon Church’s success is perhaps due partly to the efforts of its 65,000 volunteer missionaries (usually young men giving two years of their lives), and partly due to the appeal of its emphasis on clean living and strong family values in contrast to the prevailing Western culture. In a recent “Proclamation to the World,” the President and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wrote, “We warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”

All Mormon men are ordained to the priesthood, and authority resides in fathers as the heads of the family households. Bishop Thomas Thorkelson from California explains:
The father at the head of his household holds the priesthood of God. That father can baptize his child when the child reaches the age of accountability. When the child gets sick, the father can heal it. When the children go off to school, the father gives them a blessing just like Abraham blessed his sons. He is the patriarch of his family and lays his hands upon their heads and gives them a blessing.

The Church also teaches that a father should periodically interview each of his children. As holder of the priesthood, the father calls his children in and they kneel down in prayer, and he asks for discernment as he talks with his kids. He talks with them about everything in their lives. If they are old enough, they talk about dating, about their relationships with the opposite sex. They talk about honesty. Or what happens if there is a child in school who is not accepted by the other members of the class ... [or] how do you maintain what you know is right and honest, and still maintain your status as a welcome person within the community?10

Following the revelations given to Joseph Smith, Mormons typically eschew alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea, and eat meat only sparingly, thus focusing on a healthy diet of vegetables, fruits, and grains. They have developed a strong social welfare system to help families in need but also make them self-sufficient. Using volunteer labor alone, they have developed large-scale farms, ranches, peanut-product factories, coal mines, and the like, using the symbol of the hive, in which honey bees cooperate in order to meet the needs of all the members. Children are trained in preaching from a young age, as part of the system of shared responsibility. Sexual relations outside marriage are strongly discouraged.

Mormon theology is still evolving, due to its principle of continuing revelation. The head of the church is specially empowered to receive guidance from God on contemporary issues that are not clearly addressed in the Bible and The Book of Mormon. Theological beliefs are also subject to change, the most controversial of which—from the point of view of other Christians—may be the nature of God. For some time, Mormons believed that the “Heavenly Father” was originally a man but that he had risen to exaltation, and that humans can likewise become like gods. This belief still exists, but the recent prophet President Gordon Hinckley (1910–2008) restated it: “We believe in the progression of the human soul. We believe in the eternity and the infinity of the human soul, and its great possibilities.”11

Because Mormons believe that baptism is essential in order to enter the Kingdom of God, since humans are innately sinful, they may baptize not only living humans but also those who have died without being baptized—a ceremony in which a proxy is baptized on their behalf, no matter what their religion was. In response to protests from non-Mormons, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints explains that the dead person can choose to accept the proxy baptism or not.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Whereas Mormons turn to The Book of Mormon and the Bible for guidance, Jehovah’s Witnesses place their faith squarely and decisively in the Bible alone and do not have ancillary creeds. Their belief structure and their religious life refer constantly to biblical passages, and their missionaries traverse the globe, going door to door to invite people to study the Bible with them as the inspired and accurate Word of God. They feel that mainstream Christian
NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

churches began to deviate from the Bible in the second and third centuries CE by developing untrue doctrines: that God is a Trinity, that the soul is resurrected after death, and that the unrepentant wicked endure eternal torment rather than the everlasting unconsciousness that the Witnesses predict for them when God's kingdom appears. They foresee a new world in which people of all races (including many raised from the dead) will experience paradise on earth. They believe that this will happen only after the majority of humanity is destroyed for not obeying the Bible. In the understanding of Jehovah’s Witnesses, God will not let anyone, including “nominal Christians,” ruin the earth. Those who are of the true religion will be saved from the general destruction, reuniited with their dead loved ones in a paradise on earth (except for 144,000 who will live with God in heaven). According to the teachings, in the earthly paradise there will be no pain, no food shortages, no sickness, no death.

The founder of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), supported a prediction that in 1873 or 1874 the annointed ones would take their places in heaven under Christ’s rule. When that period passed uneventfully, the anticipated date was changed to 1878, then 1914, and then 1975. As the dates came and went without any apparent change in the present system of things, Russell and his successors developed the idea that Christ had arrived, but was invisibly present. Only the faithful “Jehovah’s Witnesses” would recognize his presence. Their mission is to warn the rest of the populace about what is in store. They thus go from house to house, encouraging people to follow their program of studying the Bible as an infallible announcement of the millennium and to leave politics and “false religions.” The latter include mainstream Christian churches, as above. They explain that prevailing problems such as crime, terrorism, social violence, pollution, deforestation, and global warming will soon come to an end because God has made biblical promises to save the planet, as no human institutions can:

Soon our anxieties about the future will be over, for God will take charge of planet Earth by putting in place his own government, called God’s Kingdom.
Jesus Christ had that wonderful prospect in mind when he taught his followers to pray: “Let your kingdom come. Let your will take place, as in heaven, also upon earth.” (Matthew 6: 9–10).12

Not recognizing worldly authorities and being involved in a global movement, Jehovah’s Witnesses were severely persecuted in Nazi Germany as “subversives.” They refused to give the Nazi salute, display Nazi flags at their homes, or be drafted for military service, and they kept distributing printed materials about their faith. Many were arrested and over 3,000 were sent to concentration camps, where almost half of them died from the harsh conditions. Another 250 were executed for their refusal to perform German army service. In the concentration camps, they were pressured to save themselves by signing a document refuting their faith, submitting to government authority, and supporting the German military, but few did.

During the 1930s and 1940s, many Jehovah’s Witnesses in the United States were also persecuted and arrested for their refusal to engage in military activities. Their trials became tests of the preservation of freedom of speech, press, assembly, and worship, and ultimately they won forty-three Supreme Court cases. They have been similarly successful in high courts of other countries.

Another issue that has arisen is the refusal of Jehovah’s Witnesses to have blood transfusions. They cite biblical texts forbidding eating blood, and believe that only the blood shed for them by Jesus can save them. Any Jehovah’s Witness who accepts a blood transfusion, even from his own stored blood, is regarded by others as having abandoned his religion. This belief has raised difficult legal issues in cases of children whose parents refuse to allow them to have blood transfusions.

Jehovah’s Witnesses now count almost seven million active followers—those who are engaged in proselytizing efforts to recruit people for Bible study and thereafter baptism of new members who have committed themselves to active membership. Researchers note, however, that although the ranks are somewhat replenished by children of Jehovah’s Witnesses, the rate of baptisms achieved from “field service” is dropping, from 3.6 baptisms per 10,000 hours in the field to only 1.5 in 2006 in the United States, a trend that is seen in most parts of the world. Now a Jehovah’s Witness could spend his whole life going from door to door without making a single conversion. Scholars are of divided opinion about what effect this declining rate of conversion will have on the faithful. Some predict a decline in commitment. By contrast, the influential sociologist of religion James Beckford asserted that “the main purpose of the service work is not recruitment but confirmation of identity and commitment to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, the Jehovah’s corporate entity. ... The poor response that Jehovah’s Witnesses receive on the doorstep confirms their view that the world is corrupt and heading for disaster.”13

Radhasoami

The Radhasoami movement is an outgrowth of Sikhism in India. Its leaders often have Sikh backgrounds, but while orthodox Sikhs believe in a succession of masters that stopped with the Tenth Guru and was transferred to the holy scripture, Radhasoamis believe in a continuing succession of living masters. The first of the Radhasoami gurus was Shiv Dayal Singh. In 1861, he offered to serve as a spiritual savior, carrying devotees into “Radhasoami,” the ineffable Godhead. Some 10,000 took initiation under him. After his death in
An Interview with Wolfgang Hecker

In 1958, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi began teaching the practice of Transcendental Meditation (TM) based on ancient Vedic knowledge. Maharishi’s extensive travels and worldwide organization introduced the TM technique to millions of people. For most, TM is a practical part of the daily routine to enrich one’s personal life. But for a select few, including Wolfgang Hecker of Germany, TM has become a way of life. Since 1999 he has been living in the Valley of the Saints in the Indian Himalayas as one of a hundred advanced practitioners chosen by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to practice TM for the sake of bringing greater harmony to the world. Wolfgang has been meditating for so many years that he seems to be in a constant state of inner happiness, and even his skin appears to be translucent and radiant. Wolfgang recounts:

I came to TM like almost everyone has—through the recommendation of a friend. I was very much attracted to Maharishi’s technique because I saw on the face of my friend that inner peace and happiness that radiates from people who practice TM.

Right in the very first instruction, I had exactly the experience I was always looking for. I was nineteen and interested in spiritual development. Immediately I had that experience of pure transcendental consciousness. The mind became more quiet, and more quiet, and more quiet, completely effortlessly, completely naturally, completely without any doing. The activity of the mind settled down. I was resting deeply within my own self, silent and yet fully awake at the same time, like the teacher had told me in the introductory lecture. I had that experience right away in the first meditation.

After the personal instruction, you come again for an hour on three consecutive days. You discuss further experiences with the teacher so that you are completely self-sufficient and can meditate on your own. You start practicing twenty minutes in the morning and twenty in the evening, sitting comfortably with eyes closed.

What I found very attractive was that you are not joining a club or an organization. It’s not a religious practice, it’s not a philosophy. There are Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, people who don’t believe in anything. All kinds of people practice Transcendental Meditation—housewives, doctors, anyone.

Maharishi always encouraged scientific research on the TM technique, showing that its results could be proved scientifically and would be repeatable and reliable. In the early 1970s, a scientist named Dr. Robert Keith Wallace did the first research on brain wave coherence. Every state of consciousness—waking, sleeping, dreaming—has its own very specific brain waves and biochemistry. During TM, a fourth major state of consciousness occurs in which the brain’s functioning is more orderly. Any parameter you can measure on the body at that time is pointing to greater orderliness in the physiology, and a deep level of rest.

There are advanced techniques, of which the most well known is Maharishi’s yogic flying technique. This technique also has its origin in the ancient Vedic tradition. It is a very powerful tool to enhance mind–body coordination, which brings benefits on all levels of life to the individual who is practicing it. But above that it was found by scientific research that if large groups practice yogic flying together, not only the individual consciousness of every practitioner is enlivened but also the coherence and orderliness in collective consciousness is increased. It was found that a larger number—6,000, 7,000, 10,000 people—practicing yogic flying together in one place would so dramatically increase the orderliness in the collective consciousness of everyone on the globe that positive trends would be increasing and negative trends would be decreasing.

Yogic flying is one of many siddhi techniques that Maharishi has been teaching. You first practice TM in order to come to that peaceful, very, very silent, unbounded level of pure consciousness inside. And then you begin the technique of yogic flying. It is like dropping a pebble into a silent lake. Ripples appear. So you can observe how from silent, abstract nothingness, a wave of creation arises. Here the laws of nature begin the process of creation. And as a meditator you can experience the mechanics of creation within your own consciousness.

In the case of the yogic flying siddhi, the body lifts up and the person makes a hop, so to say, in the air. His body moves up and there is a transformation from heavy to something light. But for the practitioner, all his attention is on the inner, rather than the outer. When the unbounded quietness wells up in waves of life and living, then the experience is one of bubbling up of bliss. On the individual level, the yogic flying technique is the most powerful tool to transform the personality. Inner silent happiness nourishes one’s daily life. And with mind and body coordination enhanced, scientific research has shown greater effectiveness and joy in life."
1878, the movement eventually split into what are now over thirty branches, each with its own living master, although there is theoretically only one of these at a time on the earth. The Punjabi branches are known collectively as Sant Mat, or Path of the Masters.

The most popular of the branches is Radhasoami Satsang Beas, with its well-organized center in Punjab near the river Beas. A biographer of Baba Sawan Singh (1858–1948), the saint through whom many of the branches trace their lineage, describes the typical Radhasoami attitude that contemporary Sikhism suffers from lack of a living guru who would guide them in inner spiritual practice:

In the course of time ... the emphasis of the [Sikh] teachings gradually shifted from spiritual practice under the guidance of a living master to the practice of rituals and external observances. Many devout Sikhs began to confine their religious activities to reading and reciting the holy book, little realizing that it enjoins upon the readers the necessity of internal practice of the sound current to attain ultimate salvation.15

Radhasoami is primarily an esoteric path, without exoteric ceremonies. Initiates are taught a secret yoga practice of concentrating on the third eye with attention to the inner sound and inner light. “Radha” refers to the Prime Spirit Current; “Soami” means the Prime Sound Current. The two are said to have mingled at the beginning of creation, and the primal sound continues to reverberate. Initiates aspire to ascend to pure spirit, home of the Supreme Creator, where sound and spirit currents intermingle. They are told that the experience must be both initiated and guided by a perfected being “who is possessed of all the powers of the purely spiritual regions.”16

The Radhasoami movement now claims an estimated 1.7 million initiates. Those in the Agra area of India have created whole spiritual suburbs where they live and work as well as worship together. Outside of India, devotees gather in satsangs (spiritual congregations), who are supposed to support each other in the path. They are required to be vegetarians, to meditate every day, to forgo alcohol and, if possible, tobacco, and to be employed.

Combinations of older religions

Mixtures of more than one religion have historically arisen in many places. As we have seen, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism have long intermingled in China, to the extent that it is difficult to sort out the threads as distinct traditions. When this process produces what seems to be a new religion of sorts as a combination of normally differing beliefs, it is referred to as syncretism.

Caodaism

One of the most extreme contemporary examples of syncretism arose in Vietnam early in the twentieth century. The new religious movement Caodaism was formed in 1926 in Vietnam by several people who understood that God was instructing them that religious leaders such as Moses, Yi king (in China), Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, and Jesus had all been God-inspired to start religions in their home regions. However, these all became distorted by local customs, and through lack of communication between different regions the religions went their separate ways. According to the revelations,
this multiplicity of religions kept people from living together harmoniously. Caodaists thus practice a syncretic religion made from parts of many world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, plus the indigenous Vietnamese religion Geniism. For instance, Caodaists believe that before God there was the Dao. God was born in the Big Bang, and then created yin and yang, with the “Mother Buddha” presiding over yin aspects of the cosmos. Such a mixture of religious elements is supposed by Caodaists to be the basis for the “Third Alliance between “God and Man,” a self-description that is written in many places in Caodaist temples.

Caodaist beliefs have been developed through the process of spiritual mediumship, or “channeling.” By various means that have precedents in both Eastern shamanistic practices and European spiritualist séances, spirits in Caodaism are thought to convey written messages between heaven and earth. Typically, the medium goes into trance and writes messages received from the spirits. Above a Caodai altar, a great eye with lines radiating from it represents this communication from Cao (high) Dai (palace), where God reigns. Many of the spirits who are thought to carry these communications to earthly mediums are from French culture, such as Victor Hugo, reflecting the strong French influence in Vietnam since its colonization by France in the nineteenth century. Other spirits are Chinese gods, such as Li Po, who reportedly revealed the architecture of the Great Divine Temple in Tay Ninh, center of the faith. In the early years of the religion, séances were held throughout Vietnam, with miracles, healing of the sick, and direct orders to individuals by name to join the new religion. But because there was already a strong tradition of individual channeling of spirits, there was a perceived threat to the institutionalization of Caodaism. In 1936 a decision was taken that official Caodai séances could only be held in the Holy See at Tay Ninh. Having become thus centralized and institutionalized, Caodaism played a prominent role in Vietnamese society during the turbulent war years and became the third largest religion in Vietnam, after Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. Now its central management is under the control of a communist-appointed committee and official séances have stopped, though worship continues in the Holy See temples. Outside Vietnam, members of Caodaism are left with the dilemma of trying to understand what Tay Ninh would likely advise if it were officially guiding them through its link with Cao Dai.

African-inspired syncretic religions

In contrast to the institutionalization of spiritualism in Caodaism, other syncretic mixtures that have emerged more organically include a variety of new religious movements in the Caribbean and Latin America. These have evolved from mixtures of Catholic traditions implanted there earlier, and African religions carried by slaves. They are characterized by a prevailing interest in contacting and cooperating with spirits. Santeria ("way of the saints," or Lukumi, as its practitioners increasingly prefer) blends some of the deities and beliefs of slaves from Dahomey, baKonga, and Yoruban cultures with images of Catholic saints. Since the slaves were prevented from openly practicing their ancestral faiths, they continued to do so in symbolic ways, such as hanging a white cloth from a doorway or tying bananas with red string, and also by worship of the African orisa in the form of Catholic saints. For instance, the female orisa Oshun is worshiped in Nigeria as the patron of love, marriage, and fertility,
and is associated with river water. In Cuba and in areas of the United States with large Cuban populations, devotions to Oshun have merged into reverence of the Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Charity, the patron saint of Cuba. She is said to have appeared to three shipwrecked fishermen at sea.

Santeria specialists have techniques for “magical” intervention in people’s lives to help solve problems that cannot be fixed by ordinary means. The santeros (priests), for example, say they are able to clear away negative spiritual influences around people, help them get jobs, heal sickness, attract mates, block their enemies, and get ahead financially. They see the world as a mesh of interconnections among all beings, linked by the energy known as ashe. Human efforts are required to keep the ashe flowing properly through creation and to nourish the orisa. Then, by knowing how to feed and communicate with the orisa and understanding the principles of energy, practitioners are thought to be able to wield some control over the environment.

Where remnants of slave populations have coalesced, the renewed practice of African traditions has given the people a link with their cultural heritage, a sense of inner integrity, and a means of sheer survival. But these African traditions have been viewed with some suspicion by the dominant societies. For instance, traditional African methods of communicating with the spirits include divination and the consecrated slaughter of animals, in the context of a community meal. The latter practice was outlawed in Hialeah, Florida, as “animal sacrifice,” but in a landmark judgment in 1993 the United States Supreme Court overruled the ban as an unconstitutional barrier to religious freedom. According to a majority of the Supreme Court justices: “Religious beliefs need not be acceptable, logical, consistent, or comprehensible to others in order to merit First Amendment protection.” Santeria has become very popular in Latin America and the United States, and there are pilgrimages to Nigeria for people seeking to explore the roots of their religion. It is strengthening its ties to Africa as it gains legal and social acceptance and feels less need to mask its practices as Catholic variants.
Syncretism has also developed in Africa itself. For example, a number of “new” religions in West Africa combine ritual elements of indigenous and Christian traditions which had been brought by missionaries. The missionaries regarded worship of ancestors as religiously invalid, but communications with ancestors and spirits had been a major aspect of the indigenous religions. The syncretistic new religions take seriously problems with the spirit world, such as retaliations from spirits who have not been treated respectfully, and mix Christian prayers and incense with fetishes, talismans, divining, chanting, and drumming. This syncretistic mixture gives a sense of power against evil spirits and is also applied to contemporary, this-worldly problems. These groups are most popular in urban areas, where they offer a refuge from unpleasant aspects of city life. Those such as the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star are deeply committed to serving the people in areas where governments have failed them. They operate their own schools, food shops, industries, healthcare centers, and transportation services. Those who once felt like nobodies, alienated within modern impersonal culture, now feel recognized as important individuals within a loving group. The movements revive the traditional African community spirit as a stable support network within a changing society. They may also build a sense of African pride and spiritual destiny. Rev. William Kingsley Opoku of Ghana, International Coordinator of the African Council of Spiritual Churches and member of the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, asserts:

* African Scriptures confirm that the world peace process will finally be founded in Africa, and the whole world will come and help build it, to signify the unity of mankind under the Government of God on earth.*18

**Agon Shu**

New religious movements have proliferated in Japan, with such porous boundaries between the older religions that various syncretic forms have evolved. One of the newest of these is Agon Shu, which combines Buddhist, Shinto, and Daoist beliefs and practices in dramatic ceremonies at its central community on a mountaintop in Kyoto. Its founder is Seiyu Kiriyama, who bases his way on the Agamas (*Agon* in Japanese), ancient Chinese scriptures that he encountered among Shingon Buddhists in his personal spiritual search. He asserts that the Shingon sect has become too formalistic and far from its origins, but that Esoteric Buddhism is in fact highly transformational, so that everyone can become a Buddha:

* Esoteric Buddhist practice is capable of engendering ordinary and advanced supernormal powers. Divine siddhi are obtained through practicing the methods that the Buddha taught in the Agama Sutras. The highest power of the Buddhist dharma is the power to attain liberation from karma, the power to attain Buddhahood. The liberation from karma is the greatest miracle in the universe.*19

Rev. Kiriyama also combines esoteric Shinto and Daoist practices with Buddhism in developing regimes for laymen who climb into the mountains to engage in mental and physical disciplines. At the Agon Shu center above Kyoto, these “mountain ascetics” act as assistants who don symbolic costumes and carry on dramatic fire rituals on two huge pyres, one to help realize the hopes of the living, and the other to liberate the souls of the dead. The fires
are fueled by wooden prayer sticks upon which participants have written their wishes. Rituals are conducted both by Rev. Kiriyama and by Shinto priests, with the playing of large Japanese drums, the performance of ancient dances of the Japanese imperial court in honor of Shinto deities and ancestors, and ceremonies featuring axes, bows and arrows, and swords. Visitors can also get their fortune told by “esoteric Buddhist” astrologers, and are encouraged to visit the shrine of the “Sixty Guardian Deities” of Daoism, each of which is said to guard those born during a particular year in the traditional Chinese and Japanese sixty-year cycle. It is recommended that visitors buy and keep a talisman of their own guardian deity with them “to avoid evil and to invite good luck.”

In addition to staging such syncretic spiritual dramas in Kyoto, Seiyu Kiriyama has traveled to various countries—including China, Taiwan, India, the United States, Poland, and France—to conduct prayer ceremonies for propitiation of departed souls. In 2006, for instance, he held a fire ritual next to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, in honor of holocaust victims and in hopes of world peace. His movement, founded in 1978, now claims half a million followers. Some believe that the Agon Shu techniques have brought relief from severe psychological and physical problems thought to be caused by their dead ancestors. Rev. Kiriyama explains:

> The Buddhist path has the power to destroy all negative attachments, delusions, and illusions and can bring both living and dead beings to liberation. In fact, the dissolution of a dead person’s attachments may actually be easier than those of the living. A living person’s mind burns like wildfire from one deluded conception to the next, so the roots of their attachments are all over the place. The negative attachments of a dead person, on the other hand, may be very strong but have usually cohered into a single stalk.

### Universalism

Beyond syncretism of several previous religions, some new religious movements take a broader view, encompassing all religions. Typically they teach that all prophets have brought essentially the same messages to humanity, though in different times and places.

#### Theosophical Society

A prime example of universalist beliefs is the Theosophical Society, founded by the Russian aristocrat Madame Helen Blavatsky (1831–1891). “Theosophy” means “divine wisdom,” as revealed to Madame Blavatsky by unseen “Ascended Masters.” Madame Blavatsky was a fierce character with notable psychic powers. She claimed to have traveled around the globe studying with masters of esoteric schools and undergone initiations with Tibetan masters. She founded the Theosophical Society with the motto “There is no religion higher than truth.” It was an attempt, she said, “to reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities.”

The Theosophical Society introduced ancient Eastern ideas to Western seekers, especially Hindu beliefs such as karma, reincarnation, and subtle energies. Madame Blavatsky was particularly interested in the secret esoteric...
teachings of each religion, which collectively she called the “Wisdom Religion” or the “secret doctrine.” Madame Blavatsky insisted that:

_Theosophy is not a Religion. Theosophy is Religion itself. A Religion in the true and only correct sense, is a bond uniting men together—not a particular set of dogmas and beliefs. Now Religion, per se, in its widest meaning is that which binds not only all MEN, but also all BEINGS and all things in the entire Universe into one grand whole. … Theosophy is RELIGION, and the Society its one Universal Church; the temple of Solomon’s wisdom,—in building which “there was neither hammer, nor axe, nor any tool of iron heard in the house while it was building” (1 Kings, 6); for this “temple” is made by no human hand, nor built in any locality on earth—but, verily, is raised only in the inner sanctuary of man’s heart wherein reigns alone the awakened soul._

The Theosophical Society now has members in seventy countries. The movement has splintered into several factions, which use the same name, and has also spawned other groups, such as the Agni Yoga Society founded by Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947), a Russian painter, philosopher, and humanitarian. When he traveled in the Himalayas with his wife, Helena, he painted the spiritual light he perceived in those mountains and placed in his paintings holy figures from many religious traditions. After his death, Helena encouraged students to revere unseen masters from India as well as Jesus. Now a steady stream of Russian pilgrims visit Roerich’s mountain home in Kulu, India, seeking to establish the same connection with Indian spirituality that they see in his paintings.

_Baha’i_

Universalist beliefs have also manifested in a “new” global religion, the Baha’i faith, which attempts to unite all of humanity in the belief that there is only
one God, the foundation of all religions. The Baha’i faith was foreshadowed in Persia in 1844 when a young man called the Bab (Gate) announced that a new messenger of God to all the peoples of the world would soon appear. Because he proclaimed this message in a Muslim state, where Muhammad was considered the Seal of the Prophets, he was arrested and executed in 1850. Some 22,000 of his followers were reportedly massacred as well. One of his imprisoned followers was said to be Baha’u’llah (1817–1892), a member of an aristocratic Persian family. He was stripped of his worldly goods, tortured, banished to Baghdad, and finally imprisoned in Palestine by the Turks. From prison, he revealed himself as the messenger proclaimed by the Bab. He wrote letters to the rulers of all nations, asserting that humanity was becoming unified and that a single global civilization was emerging.

Despite vigorous initial persecution, this new faith has by now spread to over five million followers in 233 countries and territories around the world, involving people from a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups. They have no priesthood but they do have their own sacred scriptures, revealed to Baha’u’llah. Baha’is compare this new messenger to previous great prophets, such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, and the Buddha. In fact, they see Baha’u’llah as the fulfillment of the prophecies of all religions. He did not declare himself to be the ultimate messenger, however. Rather, he prophesied that another would follow in a thousand years.

The heart of Baha’u’llah’s message appears in the Kitab-i-Iqan (The Book of Certitude). God, Baha’u’llah says, is unknowable. Mere humans cannot understand God’s infinite nature with their limited minds. However, God has become known through divine messengers, the founders of the great world religions. All are manifestations of God, pure channels for helping humanity to understand God’s will. The spiritual education of humans has been a process of “progressive revelation,” said Baha’u’llah. Humanity has been maturing, like a child growing in the ability to grasp complex ideas as it grows in years and passes through grade school and college. Each time a divine messenger appeared, the message was given at levels appropriate to humanity’s degree of maturity. Baha’u’llah proclaimed his own message as

Baha’is demonstrate on a Rio de Janeiro beach, requesting release of seven followers who were accused and jailed in Iran for alleged spying.
The Baha’i Model for Governance of the World

One of the most unusual features of the Baha’i faith is its own organization, which it sees as a good model for democratic governance of the whole world. Everywhere that people have converted to Baha’i faith, there is a highly organized framework designed not only to propagate the faith but also to democratize its leadership. Campaigning, electioneering, and nominations are prohibited, thus avoiding the empty promises to voters, corruption, and negative campaigning that tarnish elections in contemporary worldly democracies.

In the Baha’i “administrative order,” each local group yearly elects nine or more people to a local Spiritual Assembly. Each local member is asked to pray and meditate and then write down the names of nine adults from the local Baha’i community who seem best qualified to lead the community. The necessary qualities are those of “unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.”

By this simple and unusual process, Baha’is feel they choose leaders who are mature and humble rather than politically bold and egotistical. By the same process, the Local Spiritual Assemblies elect the National Spiritual Assemblies, and by the same process, the National Spiritual Assemblies choose the nine members of the Universal House of Justice, seated in Haifa. Baha’is feel that this framework allows both grassroots access to decision-making and a superstructure for efficient international coordination of activities. However, women are not seated at the Universal House of Justice, and this omission is currently the subject of intense debate.

Within these elected groups—and also within business, school, and family settings—Baha’is attempt to reach decisions by a nonadversarial process of “consultation.” The point of the process is to investigate truth in depth and to build consensus rather than struggle for power. Participants are enjoined to gather information from as many sources as possible and to be at once truthful and courteous to each other. Any idea once proposed is thereafter considered group property; it does not belong to one person or group, but rather is investigated impartially. As Svetlana Dorzhieva, formerly Executive Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha’is of Russia, Georgia, and Armenia, explains: “What is wonderful is that when a person says his opinion, he just forgets that it belonged to him. It is offered and then it is discussed.”

Attempts are made to reach unanimous consensus, but failing that, a majority vote may be taken. The success of this process is demonstrated in the fact that people from very diverse backgrounds manage to work and worship together.
Islam opposes Baha'i as theological heresy, for Baha'i denies that Muhammad is the final prophet. Baha'i also finds theological legitimacy in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which Islam does not consider acceptable God-worshiping traditions of revealed scriptures. Baha'is in Iran have been subjected to persecution since the inception of the religion, a pattern that increased after the 1979 revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Baha'is' attempts to unite the earth in faith extend into the political sphere, where they actively support the United Nations' efforts to unify the planet. Their goal is a unified, peaceful global society built on these principles:

1. The end of prejudice in all forms.
2. Equality for women.
3. Acceptance of the relativity and unity of spiritual truth.
5. Universal education.
6. The individual responsibility to seek truth.
8. Harmony of science and true religion. 

Social trends

New religious movements can also be seen as arising from social trends, with or without connections to previous religions or singular charismatic leadership. Examples of such general movements that have arisen in the past hundred years or so include movements furthering racial/ethnic identity, affection for nature, deep ecology, the “New Age” movement, and self-improvement. Since they are rooted in present concerns, these may or may not survive into the future. Some examples are explored below.

Ethnic identity: Rastafari

As descendents of African slaves in the Americas struggled to build better lives for themselves, religious ideals developed that mirrored their hopes. In 1895, Alexander Bedward of the Baptist Free Church in Jamaica prophesied a coming holocaust in which all the white people would be killed, leaving the Blacks, “the true people,” to celebrate the new world. He sat in his special robes as the predicted date came and went; eventually he was placed in an asylum for the insane. A more generalized hopeful vision was spread by Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), who saw a fundamental change in society that would be led by Blacks. Garvey linked these dreams to the return of Blacks to Africa, from which their ancestors had been taken as slaves; there they would rebuild a great civilization. A prophecy attributed to Garvey—“Look to Africa when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near”—was thought to have been realized when Ras (Prince) Tafari of
Ethiopia was crowned as Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia. An elaborate mystique was built up around Haile Selassie as the living God (though neither Selassie nor Garvey shared this view). Hopeful lore was based on interpretations of Selassie’s statements and passages from the Old Testament and the New Testament Book of Revelation. Poor Jamaicans (who likened themselves to the Jews in captivity in Babylon) repeatedly prepared to be given free passage back to Africa.

Haile Selassie’s reign (until his death in 1974) did nothing to liberate Jamaican Africans, but Blacks in Jamaica nevertheless developed a new religious movement around these ideals. They intend to revive the “Way of the Ancients,” their concept of the lost civilization of precolonial Africa, and to free people of African extraction from subservience. “Babylon,” the oppressor, is collectively the United States, Britain (the former colonial power in Jamaica), the state of Jamaica, and the Christian Church. In protest against Babylon, Rastafarians wear their hair in long uncombed curls, called “dreadlocks,” a lion-like mane symbolizing the natural nonindustrial life. Some give use of marijuana (ganja) religious significance as a sacrament. A distinctive music, reggae, evolved as an expression of Black pride, social protest, and Rastafarian millenarian ideals with the legendary Bob Marley as its musical prophet. In many areas the movement has developed mostly through men; they consider women incapable of experiencing Rasta awareness except through their husbands. However, by the end of the twentieth century women had begun to play more significant roles in the movement.

The Rastafari movement spread beyond Jamaica to Blacks and a few whites elsewhere in the Caribbean, North America, Europe, southern Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. It is very localized and diverse. Some Rastas insist that the truths they espouse are not just for people of African descent. Thus in some places it has been adopted by other ethnic groups such as Native Americans, Indonesians, Maoris, and Thais. And after the Soviet Union fell, during the 1990s a Rasta subculture developed among Slavic youths in some formerly communist states. They adopted reggae music and marijuana and some let their hair grow into dreadlocks, in protest against the values of

\[\text{Rastafari male musicians carry the message of reasserting Black spiritual and social rights.}\]
“Babylon.” On the other hand, some black members insist that Rastafari is only for Blacks. For instance, Ras Charles and French Dread write:

*Rastafari is a movement of black people who know Africa is the birthplace of mankind, all mankind. … We must re-culture ourselves so we can have a sense of pride, in the turning from occidental culture, and taking into ourselves the power of our African culture, which has been hidden from us so long.*

Nature spirituality

One of the strongest trends in our time is that of the religion of nature. Many who are experiencing a reconnection with the natural world do not think of this path as a religion, for it has no clear structure. It seems to be growing spontaneously, cropping up here and there in diverse forms.

**Reinvention of old practices** Some who seek to practice a nature-oriented spirituality look to the past for models. This trend is sometimes called Neo-Paganism, with reference to pre-Christian spiritual ways that are thought to have been practiced in Europe. Some call their way “Witchcraft,” despite the negative connotations associated with this label. As Starhawk, a Neo-Pagan leader and co-founder of the witchcraft tradition Reclaiming, explains:

*Modern Witches are thought to be members of a kooky cult, … lacking the depth, the dignity and seriousness of purpose of a true religion. But Witchcraft is a religion, perhaps the oldest religion extant in the West … and it is very different from all the so-called great religions. The Old Religion, as we call it, is closer in spirit to Native American traditions or to the shamanism of the Arctic.*
It is not based on dogma or a set of beliefs, nor on scriptures or a sacred book revealed by a great man. Witchcraft takes its teachings from nature, and reads inspiration in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, the flight of birds, the slow growth of trees, and the cycles of the seasons.30

Some Neo-Pagans try to reproduce some of the sacred ways of earlier European peoples, such as the Celts in the British Isles or the ancient Scandinavians. Reconstructing these ways is difficult, for they were largely oral rather than written traditions. After religions such as Christianity were firmly established, the remaining practitioners of the old ways were often tortured and killed as witches and blamed for social ills such as the plague. They were said to be in league with the devil against God, but the pagan pantheons had no devil—he was introduced by the Jewish–Christian–Muslim traditions.

In the 1940s, the writings of Gerald Gardner, a retired civil servant in England, began reintroducing Pagan ways. Gardner claimed to have been initiated into a secret coven of witches who allowed him to write about some of their practices as well as their historical persecutions by Christians, and added other rituals and “magickal” practices from various sources to replace those which had been lost because of the isolation and secrecy of the few remaining covens. He called its practitioners the “Wica.” As the ceremonial magic practices spread, the path became known as Wicca. This label may now also refer to Neo-Pagans from non-Gardnerian witchcraft lineages.

Another attempt to return to old models is Goddess spirituality. Archaeological evidence from many cultures around the world was reinterpreted during the twentieth century as suggesting that worship of a female high goddess was originally widespread. Although there were, and are now, cultures that did not ascribe gender or hierarchy or personality to the divine, some that did may have seen the highest deity as a female.

A reverent address to Ishtar, an important Mesopotamian goddess, dating from some time between the eighteenth and seventh centuries BCE, suggests some of the powers ascribed to her:

Unto Her who renders decision, Goddess of all things. Unto the Lady of Heaven and Earth who receives supplication; Unto Her who hears petition, who entertains prayer; Unto the compassionate Goddess who loves righteousness; Ishtar the Queen, who suppresses all that is confused. To the Queen of Heaven, the Goddess of the Universe, the One who walked in terrible Chaos and brought life by the Law of Love; And out of Chaos brought us harmony.31

Temples and images that may have been devoted to worship of the goddess have been found in almost every Neolithic and early historic archaeological site in Europe and West Asia. She was often symbolically linked with water, serpents, birds, eggs, spirals, the moon, the womb, the vulva, the magnetic currents of the earth, psychic powers, and the eternal creation and renewal of life. In these agricultural cultures women frequently held strong social positions. Hereditary lineages were often traced through the mother, and women were honored as priestesses, healers, agricultural inventors, counselors, prophetesses, and sometimes warriors. Goddess spirituality has thus been adopted by some contemporary feminists as their preferred religious way.

Scholars are now trying to piece together not only the possible characteristics of goddess worship, but also the circumstances of its demise. In Europe and West Asia, worship of the goddess may have been suppressed throughout the third and second millennia BCE by invading Indo-European groups in which dominant males worshiped a supreme male deity, often described as
a storm god residing on a mountain and bringing light (seen as the good) into the darkness (portrayed as bad and associated with the female).

In replacing the goddess, patriarchal groups may also have devalued the “feminine” aspect of religion—the receptive, intuitive, ecstatic mystical communion that was perhaps allowed freer expression in goddess worship. Women have been the major victims of this devaluation of the feminine, but there has also been distrust of mystics of both sexes.

To revive appreciation of the Goddess, including the goddess within themselves, as well as women’s spirituality, contemporary women have pieced together and invented rituals for both individual and group use. Diane Rae Schulz writes in *Awakened Woman* e-magazine:

> The practice of goddess spirituality can take many forms, from constructing a small altar or meditation space in one’s home, to participating in ritual circles with other women, to large seasonal celebrations which include men and children. My first experience of the practice of goddess spirituality was an all women’s Samhain (Halloween) spiral dance. The ritual involved meditation on the goddess Hecate, the dark aspect of the triple goddess, the goddess of death and rebirth, and it culminated in a whirling spiral dance—scores of women of all ages holding hands and singing, weaving in and out, re-enacting an ancient celebration of the power of women. I left the gathering feeling uplifted, energized, and reassured of women’s unique spiritual unity.32

Yet other people seeking to return to old models are members of new religions known collectively as *ethnic religions*, as distinguished from “indigenous religions” with a long history of earth-centered practices in their ancestral environment. What are called “ethnic religions” have emerged since the fall of communism as revivals of pre-Christian ethnic traditions in countries such as Russia and in eastern Europe. In Estonia, pagan rituals are now celebrated in a rather happy, mocking fashion as a form of entertainment. In other places such as the Udmurt Republic in Russia, faith in pre-Christian prayer and ceremony had been maintained at least up to communist times, only partially replaced by Christian worship. Special groves were reserved for communal prayers to the Progenitress in summer and late autumn. Now that freedom of religion is permitted, people are returning to the traditional agrarian rites for the earth’s fertility and human links with the cosmic rhythms and energies. Some members of ethnic religions question why they should revere the myths of West Asian desert tribes, as in Judeo-Christian tradition, rather than the ethnic myths of their own ancestors and native lands. Though newly revived on the basis of folklore, mythology, and ethnic pride and given the label “ethnofuturism,” the antecedents of these ways may be very ancient. Images of animal guardians have been found in peat bogs that date back as far as the eighth millennium BCE.

Teachers from earth-affirming religions that were never totally destroyed, such as certain Native American sacred ways, are highly valued as guides to worship for the natural world. From them, contemporary seekers have learned to use traditions such as vision quests, sweat lodges, and medicine
wheels. But the traditions are complex, requiring lifelong training, and are interwoven with ways of life that have passed or developed in different environments. Neo-Pagans from non-native backgrounds usually cannot experience them in their original fullness. What remains is the intent: to honor and cooperate with the natural forces, to celebrate the circle of life rather than destroy it.

In the absence of sure knowledge of ancient traditions, Neo-Pagans often develop new forms of group ritual. Usually they are held outside, with the trees and rocks and waters, the sun, moon, and stars as the altars of the sacred. Speakers may invoke the pantheistic Spirit within all life or the invisible spirits of the place. At ceremonies dedicated to a phase of the moon or the change of the seasons, worshipers may be reminded of how their lives are interwoven with, and affected by, the natural rhythms. Prayers and ritual may be offered for the healing of the earth, the creatures, or the people.

Certain spots have traditionally been known as places of high energy, and these are often used for ceremonies and less structured sacred experiences. Ancient ceremonial sites in the British Isles, such as Stonehenge and Glastonbury Tor, draw a new breed of tour groups wanting to experience the atmosphere of these places.

Neo-Pagan festivals are popular gatherings where participants shed their usual identities and perhaps their clothes, create temporary “kinship groups,” and enjoy activities such as ritual fires, storytelling, dancing, and drumming, and workshops on subjects ranging from astrology to old methods of herbal healing.

**Deep ecology** In addition to groups that are looking to replicate or reinvent past ways of earth-centered worship, many people in nontraditional societies are now seeking new ways of connecting themselves with the cosmos. What is called deep ecology is the experience of oneness with the natural world. By contrast, most Western religions have cast humans as controllers of the natural world, of a different order of being than bears and flowers, mountains and rivers. Australian deep ecologist John Seed refers to this attitude as “anthropocentrism”—“human chauvinism, the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things.”

> What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts soon happens to the man. … The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.

Attributed to Chief Seattle

During the twentieth century, many people came to a new awareness of our planetary home when they first saw it photographed from space. Rather than a globe divided by natural political boundaries, it appeared as a beautiful being, its surface mostly covered by oceans, wreathed in clouds, floating in the darkness of space. Some scientists have taken up this metaphor of the earth as a being and are finding evidence of its scientific plausibility. Biogeochemist James Lovelock (b. 1919) proposed that the biosphere (“the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae”) plus
the earth’s atmosphere, oceans, and soil can be viewed as “a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth’s atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts.” Lovelock named this complex, self-adjusting entity Gaia, after the Greek name for the Earth Goddess. In elaborations of his Gaia hypothesis, Lovelock emphasizes the “feminine” and divine characteristics of this being:

> Any living organism a quarter as old as the Universe itself and still full of vigour is as near immortal as we ever need to know. She is of this Universe and, conceivably, a part of God. On Earth she is the source of life everlasting and is alive now; she gave birth to humankind and we are part of her.

A corollary to the Gaia hypothesis is the concept that humans are becoming the global brain of the planet, its mode of conscious evolution. In the “body” of Gaia, the tropical rainforests function as the liver and/or lungs, the oceans as the circulatory system, and so on. As the evolving brain of the planet, we are becoming conscious of the dangers our activities pose to these other parts of “our body.” Peter Russell, author of *The Global Brain*, warns that we have little time to become fully conscious of our potential destructiveness, our connectedness to everything else, and to take appropriate action to forestall environmental disaster:

> As a species we are facing our final examination; … it is in fact an intelligence test—a test of our true intelligence as a species. In essence we are being asked to let go of our self-centred thinking and egocentric behaviour. We are being asked to become psychologically mature, to free ourselves from the clutches of this limited identity, and express our creativity in ways which benefit us all.

Those who perceive a oneness of all life may be inspired to take political action to protect other members of the earth’s body. Many support “green” political agendas on behalf of the environment. In Australia, Britain, and the northwest coast of the United States, people have chained themselves to giant trees to try to keep loggers from cutting them down. Julia Butterfly Hill spent 736 days living high in a 1,000-year-old redwood tree to protect it from loggers. She braved winter storms, high winds, and harassment by helicopter, refusing to come down until an agreement was negotiated with the logging company to protect the tree and the surrounding virgin forest. She was sustained by spirituality. As she wrote:

> One day, through my prayers, an overwhelming amount of love started flowing into me, filling up the dark hole that threatened to consume me. I suddenly realized that what I was feeling was the love of the Earth, the love of Creation. Every day we, as a species, do so much to destroy Creation’s ability to give us life. But that Creation continues to do everything in its power to give us life anyway. And that’s true love.

Similarly, in 1974, the women and children of Reni, a Himalayan village, wrapped themselves around trees to protect them from woodcutters seeking wood for the cities. They knew that the trees’ roots were like hands that kept the hillside from washing away, that they shaded the plants they used for medicine and homes for the animals and birds. They said, “The trees are our brothers and sisters.” Although some view such actions as romantically naive and hopeless, the “Tree Hugging” movement grew to such proportions in northern India that the government banned commercial woodcutting in Uttar Pradesh.
New Age spirituality

A great variety of spiritual movements developed in the West in the 1970s and 1980s that drew on many characteristics of other “new” movements mentioned already—progressive millennialism, interest in the supernatural and “channeled” revelations from invisible beings, reverence for nature, and universalism. In addition, they are often characterized by a quest for self-improvement but in highly individualistic, anti-institutional formats. Collectively, these ways, rather than being called “religions,” are therefore often called “New Age spiritual movements.”

A special working group in the Vatican studying New Age groups concluded that they are among the “contemporary signs of the perennial human search for happiness, meaning, and salvation,” which people from mainstream institutions may not have found in their own religion due to clergy’s lack of attention to such central spiritual themes as “the importance of man’s spiritual dimension and its integration with the whole of life.” As promoted in books and workshops, this amorphous but widespread movement anticipates that a network of personally transformed individuals will eventually lead to the transformation of the planet. Author Marianne Williamson voiced this hope in 1994:

A mass movement is afoot in the world today, spiritual in nature and radical in its implications. After decades of declining influence on the affairs of the world, there is once again a widespread consideration of spiritual principles as an antidote to the pain of our times. Like flowers growing up through pieces of broken cement, signs of hope and faith appear everywhere. These signs reflect the light of a transcendent force at the center of things, present in our lives in a corrective and even miraculous manner, a light we can reach personally through internal work of a devotional nature. We are experiencing now an alteration of collective consciousness, centered not in government or science or religion per se. It is the rising up of our true divine nature, a reassertion of God in the consciousness of modern man.

The roots of New Age spiritual movements are many, including Western esotericism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, astrology, and introduction of the Eastern religions to the West. Another antecedent is found in discoveries about spiritual healing, developed into a full-fledged religious movement by Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910) as Christian Science. In her *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Eddy proposed that negative inner states such as hatred, fear, selfishness, and envy obscure one’s relationship with God’s love. When they are surrendered, healing occurs naturally as one’s true spiritual being emerges. Only God is real; the physical body, with its ailments, is not. Christian Scientists may refuse medical treatment, feeling that God is the healer.

A related trend is New Thought, which emphasizes the power of positive thinking. This diverse movement spread widely due to the efforts of Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849–1925). At first such groups were quite open to female leadership, but during the twentieth century some tended to revert to patriarchal male structures, with women only in supporting roles. Some are based on the teachings of a single charismatic leader, with organizations that support dissemination of their teachings without church buildings, a priesthood, or other features of organized religions.

One of the manifestations of New Thought that has proved relatively
long-lived is the Unity School of Christianity, which dates back to 1886. Its inspirational publication, *Daily Word*, is now available in twelve languages. Like many other new religious movements, the Unity School makes extensive use of the Internet for sharing its teachings and practices. On *Daily Word*’s website, each day a different positive affirmation is posted for reflection, such as this one:

*Life-giving energy flows throughout my body. I am renewed.*

*Divine energy flows in and through God’s creations, renewing, restoring, uplifting. I see this energy in the exuberance of a child, in the beauty of a flower blossom and in the vibrant display of autumn’s colors. I feel it in the warmth of the sun’s rays, the freshness of a gentle breeze.*

*As I align my thoughts with life and wholeness, I feel divine energy in my own body as well. I am in the flow of life-giving energy, and it is in me. … I am renewed in mind, body and spirit, Thank You, God.*

New Age spirituality is often mystical, favoring direct communion with the unseen. The Findhorn community is a striking example. One of its leaders, Dorothy Maclean, studied with Sufi masters, learning how to receive “inner guidance,” before joining with Eileen and Peter Caddy in developing Findhorn, a transformation of desolate dunes on the coast of Scotland into a lush farming community. Dorothy’s role was to receive communications from the energies that she called the plant *devas*, after the Hindu term for the invisible “shining ones.” Dorothy developed a cooperative relationship with the *devas*, asking for their “advice” on matters such as what nutrients the plants needed. The Findhorn community receives thousands of visitors every year, has its own eco-village, and hosts workshops on many topics designed to elevate human consciousness.

The main thrust of the 1970s and 1980s New Age movement was the belief that a new era was arising in which poverty, war, racism, and despair would give way to a new feeling of global human community, with peace, harmony, and happiness prevailing. Since this was not to be accomplished through any religious or political organization, the idea developed that groups of people could act as receivers for positive cosmic energies so that their effects would create a “planetary consciousness” that would spread to the rest of the world. This belief was strengthened by widespread distribution of a book, *The Hundredth Monkey*, which described what later turned out to be a false report that monkeys on a Japanese island were affected by behavioral changes of monkeys on another island. Many New Age groups thus gathered to receive the cosmic energies and try to create enough critical mass to change the world.

The longed-for era of peace and harmony did not emerge, and talk of a “New Age” gradually faded away. However, the many professionals who were making a living as workshop leaders, holistic health practitioners, publishers of New Age literature, and the like were still on the scene. Collectively
they shifted to emphasizing transformation in individual consciousness, perhaps coupled with the longer-term goal of global transformation.

While part of the New Age movement lost its millennial nature and focused instead on personal growth and the search for mystical communion through techniques such as meditation, a different millennial thrust developed in some circles: the idea that gradually “higher consciousness” will spread among enough humans for others to be drawn into the same enlightened worldview and thus the whole world will “ascend.” This idea was popularized by the bestselling 1993 novel by James Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy*, which claimed to be true and presented “nine key insights into life itself—insights each human being is predicted to grasp sequentially, one insight then another, as we move toward a completely spiritual culture on earth.” The Ninth Insight is this:

As we humans continue to increase our vibration, an amazing thing will begin to happen. Whole groups of people, once they reach a certain level, will suddenly become invisible to those who are still vibrating at a lower level. … It will signal that we are crossing the barrier between this life and the other world from which we came and to which we go after death. This conscious crossing is the path shown by the Christ. … At some point everyone will vibrate highly enough so that we can walk into heaven, in our same form.

Sequels to the novel followed, including *The Tenth Insight*, in which spiritually evolved people create a new global spiritual culture.

Sociologists note that many people who participate in nature rituals and New Age movements are nomads, dabbling here and there without any deep commitment to what Stark and Bainbridge called “audience cults.” In countries allowing freedom of religious choice, they may wander through a growing supermarket of spiritual offerings, taking a bit here and there according to their needs of the moment. Sandra Duarte de Souza describes “spiritual nomadism” in contemporary Brazil, where most people remain nominally Christian but many are also attracted to nature-oriented New Age groups. As opposed to a “radical change of life, marking the biography of the converted forever and demanding his faithfulness, … the idea of ‘religious transit’ admits the ‘walk through’ several religions, does not demand intestinal changes in the way of life of the ‘transient,’ and exempts or attenuates the commitment.” Of course, the same can be said of established religions—that many people belong to them without deeply transformational inner commitment.

### Invented religions

One of the newest trends in religions is a medley of religion-like movements that mix features reminiscent of traditional religions with aspects of popular culture. This trend is an extreme example of contemporary individualistic mores which give people the freedom to pick and choose among various religious paths. Sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) referred to such pop culture hybrids as “hyper-reality,” for in the bewildering array of signs and symbols in postmodern consumer society, the symbols of pop culture take on a life of their own and become more real for the consumer than ordinary reality.

Science fiction movies, Harry Potter, and role-playing fantasy games have morphed into new religious movements, such as “Jediism,” based on...
the order of Jedi Knights in the *Star Wars* films. According to the website www.jediism.org, the Jedi movement incorporates strands of many older ways, including Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Stoicism, Catholicism, Daoism, Shinto, modern mysticism, the way of Shaolin monks, samurai warriors, and the Code of Chivalry of medieval knights. The mission statement of Jediism draws on many of these traditions:

> We are a caring and supportive spiritual community that helps individuals worldwide to attain and sustain a one-to-one-relationship with the Light of their own true Inner Self and therefore reconnect to their own True Divine Nature to which we refer to as Jedi. ... Our intention is to make a difference by helping people rediscover the real values that inspire illumined action and create an atmosphere of enlightenment and peace, internally and simultaneously in our international community.

The famous line from *Star Wars*, “May the Force be with you,” has been elaborated in Jediism into an explanation of what this Force is: “An energy field generated by all living things, the Force surrounds and penetrates everything, binding the universe together.” This hyper-real hybrid was promoted as a parody in 2001, when a grassroots movement urged people to record their religion as “Jedi” when approached by census-takers. Huge numbers of people did so—over 70,000 in Australia, 21,000 in Canada, 15,070 in Czech Republic, over 53,000 in New Zealand, and 390,127 in England and Wales. People’s motivations for listing themselves as Jedi apparently ranged from amusement to protest over including the question of religious affiliation in census surveys.

### Opposition to new religious movements

Throughout history, new religious movements have met with opposition from previously organized religions, which perceive them as threats to their own strength or brand them as heresies.

Baha’is claim that after the 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran persecution of Baha’is has become official government policy. According to the Baha’i website, since that time:

> more than 200 Baha’is have been executed or killed, hundreds more have been imprisoned, and tens of thousands have been deprived of jobs, pensions, businesses, and educational opportunities. Formal Baha’i administration had to be suspended, and holy places, shrines, and cemeteries have been confiscated, vandalized, or destroyed.

In Russia, various foreign-based new religious movements are fighting for freedom of worship against a 1997 law, passed at the behest of the Russian Orthodox Church, which restricts the activities of groups that were newly introduced to Russia. Lawyers defending these groups have had some success in court cases with reference to Jehovah’s Witnesses and organizations sponsored by the Unification Movement.

With or without prompting by established religions, nations may attempt to suppress new religious movements. China has taken strong measures to stamp out Falun Gong. The movement is one of many based on traditional Daoist Qigong energy practices, but it has a living charismatic teacher, Li Hongzhi, who now lives in exile in New York City, from where he has spread
Falun Gong to thirty countries. In 1999 the Chinese government characterized the movement as an “evil cult.” When approximately 10,000 people staged a silent protest in Beijing, the government responded by banning Falun Gong, alleging that it had “been engaged in illegal activities, advocating superstition and spreading fallacies, hoodwinking people, inciting and creating disturbances, and jeopardizing social stability.” Subsequent protestors were reportedly jailed and beaten, followed by wave upon wave of peaceful protests by members who met the same fate. Some are said to have died from torture while in police custody. Claims of human rights abuses of Falun Gong practitioners continue. But the movement still persists in China and other countries, and practitioners claim that Falun Gong has brought them physical healing, inner peace, and answers to the central questions of life.

In addition to negative reactions from governments and previously organized religions, new religious movements usually meet with opposition from family members of those who join. They may be worried about violence that has sometimes been associated with some new religious movements and widely reported in the media. A catastrophic example occurred in Waco, Texas, in 1993, when a community of Branch Dravidians was besieged by federal officials: a fire broke out and approximately eighty of the Branch Dravidians died as the fire engulfed their compound. The Branch Dravidians had been anticipating the millennium and trying to obey what they understood to be God’s will, preparing for the end of the world as prophesied by their messiah, David Koresh. Another spectacular violent incident occurred in 1995, when members of the Aum Shinrikyo movement launched a poison gas attack on the Tokyo subway under the leadership of Shoko Asahara.

Religion-related violence is not limited to new religious movements.
Religious extremists who claim to be followers of major established religions are resorting to violence in many parts of the globe. Are the followers of new religious movements different? Whether old or new, if movements are sincerely expecting imminent world changes and have isolated themselves to prepare for the end, they distance themselves from other points of view. In isolation and group solidarity, seemingly irrational beliefs—such as the apocalyptic scenario of the biblical book of Revelation—may seem to make perfect sense.

In addition to isolation and group support in their beliefs, religious movements may in rare cases turn violent in response to hostility from the surrounding culture. This response is called “deviance amplification” in the literature. Specialists in new religious movements, Massimo Introvigne and Jean-François Mayer, have observed that when some groups perceive threats from the outside they encourage their members to feel that they are not of this world. When under attack from the outside and also perhaps shaken by defections of disillusioned members, they may conclude that suicide is their only good option. People enter the group of their own free will, but when the trend toward suicide or violence becomes apparent they may find it difficult to leave if the leader is extremely charismatic or even coercive. Families of those who join unfamiliar religious movements may thus fear that they may be dangerous.

There is also concern that new religious movements may cause psychological damage, especially to vulnerable young people. In the United States, the “anti-cult” movement employed special agents who captured and “deprogrammed” followers of new religions, at the request of their parents. However, the claim that members of new religious movements had been “brainwashed” has been largely discredited. As Professor Catherine Wessinger notes, mainstream social and religious institutions all practice some kind of indoctrination in which people’s thinking is molded:

> Usually the processes utilized by members of NRMs to attract and socialize converts are not different from those used in mainstream families and institutions. Belief in brainwashing offers a simplistic explanation for why people adopt unconventional beliefs. It obscures the fact that people adopt alternative beliefs because those beliefs make sense to them, and that people join groups because those groups offer them benefits. [The new religious movements that she examined] all regarded people in mainstream society as being brainwashed by television, the media, educational institutions, and by the values of materialistic society. They believed that their respective groups taught the truth as opposed to the delusions of the brainwashed people in external society. In most cases, the members willingly undertook the discipline and lifestyle of their unconventional religion, which they believed would lead to achieving salvation, their ultimate concern.49

The “brainwashing” theory has been further undermined by studies showing considerable “voluntary turnover”—most people who are introduced to new religious movements’ philosophies choose not to adopt them, and even those who enter new religious movements, or whose parents are followers, are more likely to leave than to stay in them.

In addition to the discrediting of the brainwashing theory of why people join new religious movements, the coercive deprogramming techniques of the anti-cult movement have been deemed illegal in themselves. The Cult Awareness Network went bankrupt in 1996 after one of its deprogramming
victims won a multimillion-dollar damage suit against it. Nevertheless, what are now called “anti-cult activities” continue in the hands of other organizations, such as the International Cultic Studies Association. Anti-cult activities are also rampant on the Internet, which is now a hotbed of allegations against new religious movements. These can be posted by anyone, without any editorial control. At the same time, the Internet allows new religious movements to present their own positions, unfiltered by anti-cult prejudice.

There are also governmental efforts to eliminate or control new religious movements in Europe, where governments are struggling with issues of religious freedom versus public safety. France is home to hundreds of new religious groups, including the secret Order of the Solar Temple, some of whose members died in mass suicides and murders during the 1990s. There has been concern that some new religious movements are using a religious front to carry on illegal businesses or to extort money from gullible followers. There is also concern in Germanic countries and the United States about neo-fascist groups in the guise of medieval cults whose intentions seem to involve the propagation of white supremacy ideas and hatred of immigrants.

The French government has enacted secularizing legislation that inhibits the practice of many mainstream religions, in addition to anti-cult legislation and police scrutiny of groups such as Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Scientologists, as well as evangelical and charismatic Christian groups. In Italy, by contrast, the Supreme Court in 1997 overruled a lower court judgment that had defined “religion” only as Judaism or Christianity; nonprofit recognition and tax exemption was extended to Scientology by the court ruling. Germany grants tax-exempt status only to a few long-established religions, excluding not only new religious movements but also Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Will new religious movements last?

All of the major religions were once new and were once resisted by more entrenched institutions. Will any of today’s new religious movements last more than a few generations? Those who study the sociology of religion are researching the secular factors that seem to predispose a new religious movement to become widespread and longlasting. One of these is a balance between similarities to existing beliefs (making it attractive and nonthreatening to potential converts) and differences compelling enough for people to convert.

A second factor is organization, personal commitment, and bonds between members that will survive the death of the prophet and the original followers. This factor includes efforts to propagate the new religion, including hagiographies—idealized accounts of the life of the founder designed to interest new members. These may diverge from the known facts, a common occurrence within the process of popular myth-making.

A third factor is the social setting: Times of great social change, places that allow freedom of choice in matters of religion, and societies with fragmented relationships between people are most conducive to the recruitment of new members. Fourth is the status of prevailing religions; if they have become merely institutional with little spiritual life they are susceptible to being supplanted by more vibrant new faiths. Fifth is the younger generations: Children must be continually born or recruited into the faith, taught its values, and given responsible parts to play in keeping the faith alive.
The spiritual aspects of new religions are also of major importance but they cannot easily be quantified. Among these are the genuine spirituality of the founder or spreader of the message, and the ability of the new teachings and their presentation to capture people’s hearts, change their lives, motivate them to act collectively, and give them the courage to face social opposition.

Frank Kaufmann, founder of Filial Projects and long-time director of the Unification movement’s Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace, offers these insights from his decades of experience within a new religious movement:

One of my recent observations is the persistent power of religion based in its malleable interpretive power. Believers say with equal peace, “Look! People really like us. This is proof our religion is true,” and “Look! Everybody hates us. This is proof our religion is true.” You’ve got opposite facts being used to support the assurance that everything is fine—both giving believers confidence and solace that they are on the right path. Not bad. You can’t get away with that selling stocks, or selling socks.

But this kind of self-proving and self-assuring is for those who hold their beliefs at some vague distance, and are happy for postcards of “proof” from the pulpit. What’s closer (and in my opinion, more important) is what you love, and what you know. For self-aware believers, the divine comes into your life through some person or another. If you are lucky, by God’s grace you remain eternally bound to that person. Over the course of time that person teaches you things he or she believes are true. You try them out, and in the process compile your own affirmations and confirmations, aided each step of the way by God’s loving help and hints.50

Key terms

- apocalypse: The dramatic end of the present age.
- apostasy: The accusation of abandonment of religious principles.
- cult: Any religion that focuses on worship of a particular person or deity.
- ethnic religions: New religions that emerged since the fall of communism as revivals of pre-Christian ethnic traditions in eastern Europe and Russia.
- Goddess spirituality: Worship of a female high goddess in ancient times, now revived in many places.
- millennium: One thousand years, a term used in Christianity and certain newer religions for a hoped-for period of 1,000 years of holiness and happiness, with Christ ruling the earth, as prophesied in the Book of Revelation.
- Neo-Paganism: Nature-oriented spirituality referring to pre-Christian sacred ways.
- orisa: Yoruba term for a deity.
- rapture: Nineteenth-century belief amongst some Christians, using Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, that Christians would be caught up in clouds to meet Jesus when he returned to earth.
- Santeria: The combination of African and Christian practices that developed in Cuba.
- sect: A subgroup within a larger tradition.
- syncretism: A form of religion in which otherwise differing traditions are blended.
- Wicca: Neo-Pagan sect of a secret coven of witches traced to the writings of Gerald Gardner in England in the 1940s.
Review questions

1. Define and give an example of a new religion, a cult, a sect, an audience cult, a client cult, and a cult movement.
2. What challenges do religious groups such as the Unification Movement face as they mature?
3. Describe some of the basic features of new religious movements such as Mormonism, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Radhasoamis, Caodaism, Santeria, Agon Shu, the Theosophical Society, Baha’i, and Rastafarianism.
5. Define syncretism and give at least two examples of syncretic religions.

Discussion questions

1. Describe and compare the arguments made by those who advocate tolerance for new religious movements and those who believe they should not be tolerated.
2. Do you think that any legal limits should be placed on new religions? If so, by what criteria? If not, why?
3. Can you envision qualities and beliefs that would constitute a positive new religion?
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