

## *Nova Religio* Symposium:

# Academic Integrity and the Study of New Religious Movements

## Introduction

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**F**or the last two or three decades new and alternative religions have been at the center of heated controversy in the United States as various advocates have debated the desirability of curbing the operations of leaders and organizations that, many believe, have abused their followers and constitute a real threat to society.

This controversy has spread to the scholarly community that studies this relatively small byway in American religious life. The majority of the scholars involved in the debate have concluded that the fears and impressions prevalent among the general public and worried parents of “cult” members are overblown; their research has tended to debunk the widely held perception that many alternative religions engage in brainwashing and mind control, leading them to conclude that, although abuses do occur in some specific situations, by and large the alternative movements are, if unorthodox, worthy of the general protection of the First Amendment enjoyed by larger, more accepted faiths. Other scholars, however, have come to very different conclusions and argue that something like mind control *does* exist at least occasionally and that significant numbers of the nonconforming contemporary movements in question do present a real threat to the public. Both camps have among their adherents goodly numbers of social activists—defenders of nonmainstream movements against their critics, on the one hand, and, on the other, critics whose courses of action range from purely rhetorical combat to advocacy of forcible intervention, deprogramming, and legal restrictions on the activities of nonmainstream groups deemed abusive or otherwise unacceptable.

This still-new journal has quickly been drawn into the scholarly fray. Central to the ongoing controversy has been the debate over brainwashing/mind control, and, in a two-part article published in *Nova*

*Religio's* two previous issues, a proponent of the mind-control hypothesis not only argued that brainwashing does exist, but accused the academic majority—nonbelievers in the brainwashing model—of closing the debate prematurely, of actually shutting the minority point of view out of a fair hearing.<sup>1</sup> For some time scholars have also debated the propriety of receiving support, compensation, or favors from groups being studied. As long ago as 1978, Irving Louis Horowitz fired a major salvo, contending that scholars who accepted free travel to conferences sponsored by the Unification Church were unwittingly legitimating the work of Sun Myung Moon, the unsavory (in Horowitz's view) founder of the movement.<sup>2</sup>

Two decades after Horowitz's article, controversies over alternative religions still rage within the community of scholars. As an early project, the editors of *Nova Religio* decided to address some of the simmering issues in a multilateral academic forum. If nothing else, we demonstrated that the disputes of yore are still with us and that tension among persons of differing outlooks remains high; we received submissions from polemicists on both sides of the argument, the more extreme of them engaging in name-calling and accusations of malfeasance that seemed at least as much based on point of view as on the set of facts in question, given that a particular set of facts could be subject to more than one interpretation. The editors quickly determined that shouting matches and finger-pointing would not move the debate forward and would perpetuate what was obviously a large reservoir of bad blood—something we had, perhaps naively, been hoping to help overcome. After a good deal of editorial consultation, we have finally fused four of the papers, along with this introduction, into a tempered forum that, we hope, conveys useful information and thought-provoking reflections, even if it does not mark a truce in the cult wars.

Each of the authors of the four featured articles has been involved in the study of alternative religions—and, to a greater or lesser extent, in some of the disputes that have raged in the profession—for many years. Massimo Introvigne, in the lead article, provides a synopsis of current battles over "cults" in Europe that will be eye-opening to many American scholars. What is a somewhat marginal debate among competing private interests in the United States has taken on much larger dimensions, including governmental involvement, in several European countries. The give-and-take that Americans would normally expect has yielded, Introvigne tells us, to the virtual adoption of a countercult ideology as official policy by various governments. Introvigne then explores, again from a European perspective, the thorny matter of financial interrelationships among scholars, religious movements, and governmental agencies.

The charged public debate on "cult" matters has contributed to a strong polarization of opinion among academics. Thomas Robbins

explores that polarization and examines distortions that it has introduced into the larger debate, including name-calling and the rise of double standards by which the larger society regards one side of the professional debate as truer than the other, a bias that can have important implications for legal proceedings involving marginal religions.

James T. Richardson has been at the forefront of the academic and legal debate over nonmainstream religions, and here he supplies an autobiographical account of the path by which he was drawn into work as an expert witness in court cases involving such groups. Richardson and several other academics ultimately became the defendants in a multimillion-dollar lawsuit brought by their ideological opposites, and here he recounts the events that led him into that unenviable situation.

If many academics believe that unusual religions are widely and unfairly maligned, Stephen A. Kent and Theresa Krebs contend that many scholars themselves are insufficiently critical of the groups they study. Lack of critical distance can result from any of several circumstances; among them are being taken in by masterful public relations efforts and accepting financial support or hospitality from a group a given scholar is studying. Kent and Krebs argue that scholarly inquiry sometimes turns, perhaps unintentionally, into advocacy work for a religious movement.

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What has emerged as perhaps the most contentious issue in this discussion—the acceptance by investigators of financial support and gifts from groups they are studying—has certainly not been resolved, and the issue remains in need of a much more thorough plumbing than it has so far received in these pages or elsewhere. In other disciplines, sponsorship and outside control of research, including some from dubious casts of characters, are well accepted. Private corporations support a good deal of research in the sciences that has to do with their business interests, and it is not unusual for them to exercise control in one way or another over the direction of research or, at least, over the author's freedom to publish unwanted findings. Tobacco and pharmaceutical companies, to name two prominent examples, both spend a good deal of money on university research and exercise some control over it and its dissemination. One recent report found that one out of three published scientific articles had at least one author with a vested interest in his or her research. This finding does not even include the lucrative consultancies and honoraria that abound.<sup>9</sup> In many cases special-interest support of research is never publicized; indeed, the critics of the compromised status quo typically do not suggest that the

sponsorship of research by interested parties is inherently wrong, but only that full *disclosure* of funding sources should become the norm.

Nor is the situation restricted to the hard sciences. The DARE anti-drug educational program that operates in thousands of schools nationwide has, according to recent popular-press accounts (and a lively Internet debate), financed research about itself and then has interfered with the dissemination of findings that DARE is ineffectual or even counterproductive despite its lavishly financed operations.<sup>4</sup> In religious studies, sponsorship and concomitant outside control by “established” religions is well accepted; the Catholic Church, for example, funds a good deal of Catholic-related research, and Jewish studies would go into deep remission without support from Jewish-related funding sources. The Mormons—as recently as half a century ago virtually anathema to mainline religionists—have long heavily supported extensive research on themselves, and the growing acceptance of Mormonism in American society probably stems in significant part from that undertaking. But the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regularly controls the dissemination of research findings, access to Church archives, and lines of inquiry at Church-owned institutions of learning. In a round of crackdowns on intellectuals in the 1990s, the Church decided that papers written by scholars employed by Church-run institutions would have to be cleared by censors before they could be published or even read at academic meetings. Academic response to that heavy-handedness has been muted, even though it constitutes a more drastic incursion on academic freedom and intellectual integrity than any junket for academics sponsored by, say, the Unification Church ever would.

Of course one could argue that the bottom line should be the quality of the work itself, not who paid for it or under what conditions it was conducted. Let the work be put out for public inspection; let those in a position to judge it perform that task. The problem is that that seems to be a generally acceptable system when support from mainline religions is involved, but not when controversial religious minorities supply the money. If that distinction is to stand, some omniscient arbiter must draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable religions—an impossible task.

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In drafting the call for papers for this symposium, I suggested a number of topics as worthy of exploration. Some of those have been addressed by the papers here assembled, but others had no takers or at least were not examined in depth. I would suggest, therefore, that some issues having to do with ethics and academic integrity still merit

examination, and I hope that reflection on them may take place in the pages of this journal in the future.

Only one of the essays, for example, directly addresses the matter of privacy for new religious movements, and it does not address the issue comprehensively. Some religions have asserted sweeping rights to privacy for many years, even centuries. Cloistered Catholic sisters are largely cut off from the outside world, and their right to be left alone has never been seriously challenged, however much some individuals—including members of sisters' families—might dislike the enforced estrangement cloistering entails. Freemasons have conducted their rituals in secret since their founding. Mormons have successfully asserted their right to privacy in their Temple activities for over 150 years. Although an occasional apostate tells Temple secrets, and thus outsiders over time have been able to compile a fairly comprehensive picture of Temple activities, few have suggested that Mormon Temple secrecy has no place in an open society. Such a presumption of a right to privacy, however, has not always been granted to less influential religions. NRM scholars have in a number of cases infiltrated various groups covertly for the purpose of studying them. Is such infiltration ever justifiable? If so, under what conditions is it so? At what point should a private organization be able to assert its right to control access to its private activities? At what point does the public's right to know and the necessity of exposing illegal or abusive behavior supersede the presumptive right to privacy?

Neither do any of the essays here address, fundamentally, the propriety of scholarship that has a prior agenda. Some academics have argued that one should not only have no participatory relationship with what one studies, but no strong political or social convictions that bear on the subject. By such a standard some precincts of academia are nearly entirely out of bounds; women's studies, for example, is populated mainly by persons of feminist conviction, and African-American studies is inseparable from an agenda of combating racism. In several fields a body of scholarship conducted by scholars with no strong personal convictions on the subject at hand would change the face of the discipline greatly. In any event, does the study of alternative religions have space for scholars who come to the field with a conviction that all groups claiming to be religious should be free of substantial restriction or criticism, or for scholars with similarly substantial countercult sympathies? If one develops passions and convictions as a result of one's scholarship, should one then abandon one's field of study and turn to other work?

Even if we permit scholars with political and social dispositions relevant to their work to toil in the field, should they be expected to limit their behavior? That is, are we to be only passive observers, or should we feel free to be activists? Should a scholar with a countercult

outlook refer the distraught parents of a NRM member to deprogrammers? Should a scholar with sympathies for a particular religious movement be shunned if s/he were to join the movement? To what extent is scholarship compatible with advocacy?

Must everyone who explores the world of new religious movements do so under the same rules? Do the rules change with individual circumstances? Mentioned only briefly in the pages that follow is the fact that the study of alternative religions embraces a phenomenon perhaps not found in every venue in the academy—that of fully credentialed professionals whose financial support comes from their academic work alone, not from any educational or ecclesiastical institution. Such persons make their livings in a variety of ways; some have become paid professional witnesses in court cases, some have joined the lecture circuit, and others have lived off earnings from their writing. Many who have tried it have found freelance academic work financially unrewarding, and earning a living from scholarly writing is a particularly difficult undertaking, as any academic author knows. Should those persons who have real survival needs operate under different rules of conduct than others more comfortably situated? If so, should the evaluation of their work and their opinions be handled differently than it is for scholars more conventionally employed?

Even sponsorship of research has dimensions that are not pursued here. Scholars have been criticized for receiving travel money, entertainment, or even paychecks from organizations on which they do research, but should support from the other side of the cult-wars fence not also be scrutinized? Would it be proper for a scholar's investigations to be supported by a countercult organization or by a government agency that exhibits a decidedly countercult outlook in its work? Should American scholars accept funding for the provision of expertise that will help the governments of Japan and several countries in Europe crack down on nonmainstream religions? Outside support is a sticky issue, one that we have hardly exhausted in these few pages.

One final note: as sociologist of religion Bryan Wilson has occasionally reminded us, we should overestimate neither the social dimensions of alternative religions in Western society nor our own influence in the debate over them. While all of us in the field believe that we are delving into issues of mighty social import, in reality the controversial, marginal groups in question number probably at most in the low hundreds and typically have small membership rosters. Media-fueled fears notwithstanding, they on the whole do not seriously threaten to change the center of gravity of the world's religious life. The number of persons seriously abused by alternative religions in a year would probably not add up to a day's domestic-violence docket in the court system of a single major American city. Some specific groups may eventually grow large and influential, but by prevailing social theory they will do so only by

moving into (or at least closer to) the religious mainstream, as the Mormons did by abandoning polygamy and racial exclusivity and by generally downplaying their distinctiveness. And if the actual social position and influence of alternative religions is small, that of the scholars who study them is probably smaller still: witness the fact that the majority academic view that the public cult scare is overblown has had remarkably little influence on prevailing opinion. Groups that have paid for scholars to examine their activities may have wasted their money. A great many academic journals circulate only a few hundred copies each, and those go mainly to specialist scholars and research libraries where they are little read. The larger public seems to know what it thinks and doesn't much care to seek out jargon-laden academic treatises for a contrary point of view.

I am reminded of an anecdote I read in some long-forgotten place of a researcher who had spent decades studying the intelligence of dolphins. The subject had great public appeal, and the researcher received frequent speaking invitations from people who believed that dolphins are extraordinarily intelligent animals—people who sometimes contended that, but for an opposing thumb or some equivalent minor refinement, dolphins might have built great civilizations. The researcher, after years of painstaking study, had come to conclude that it just wasn't so. Yes, dolphins are intelligent as animals go, but their brainpower is by no stretch “nearly human”; dolphins may be friendly to humans, but they are just slightly higher on the intelligence scale than many other species. At every talk he told audiences his honest conclusions, but rarely did he convince many of his listeners. They *knew* that dolphins were incredibly smart, and this guy was just some foggy academic who had missed the forest for the trees. He lamented that he was apparently forever condemned to have his good research disregarded by a public with a mind of its own. And thus it seems to be for research into alternative religions.

Nonmainstream religions have always been with us and show no signs of vanishing. People will continue to fear the new, condemn the different, digest sensational media reports, and jump to conclusions without much regard for what the most eminent academic authorities have to say. Our scholarly conversations seem condemned to be largely with each other.

*Nova Religio's* editors and I thank the many individuals who have helped to develop this symposium and especially the participants themselves, who have engaged in a lively internal debate and strengthened each other's papers as a part of the editorial process. We hope that the discussion will continue, and therefore we solicit responses to what we are presenting here as well as additional essays in this general subject area for consideration for publication in future issues of *Nova Religio*.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Zablocki, "The Blacklisting of a Concept: The Strange History of the Brainwashing Conjecture in the Sociology of Religion," *Nova Religio* 1 (October, 1997): 96-121.

<sup>2</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz, "Science, Sin, and Sponsorship," in *Science, Sin, and Scholarship: The Politics of Reverend Moon and the Unification Church*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 260-81.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Zalewski, "Ties That Bind: Do Corporate Dollars Strangle Scientific Research?" *Lingua Franca* (June/July, 1997): 52.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Stephen Glass, "Truth and D.A.R.E.," *Rolling Stone* no. 781 (March 5, 1998): 42-43, 81.