

ETHAN DOYLE WHITE, *THE NEW WITCHES OF THE WEST* (CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE ELEMENTS, 2024); ISBN: 2635-232X (EPDF); II; 72 PP.; RRP: US\$20.00.

Keywords: witchcraft, Wicca, Gerald Gardner, gender, Enlightenment, modernity

The New Witches of the West Religion is a short book in the Cambridge Elements series focused on New Religious Movements (NRMs). Ethan Doyle White's "Introduction" employs Ronald Hutton's four types of "witches" - practitioners of *maleficium*, those who "use supernatural forces either to harm or to help" (p. 2), women who are independent of male control (which may be a term of abuse or a feminist badge of pride), and "*modern religious witches*" (p. 3) – and it is this fourth group that are the subject of his study. While Wicca is the most prominent source for such people, traditional witchcraft, Luciferians, Satanists, esotericists, and eclectic Pagans may also claim the title "witch." Doyle White's book is a pioneering effort to understand these disparate people as part of a tendency, a long term spiritual and cultural pattern. Chapter 1, "Tradition," introduces the ways witchcraft was characterised as pre-modern or obsolete in the twentieth century and how this "pastness" (p. 7) permitted the creation of new religions that were nevertheless linked to tradition. There is a brief historiography of writings about witches and witchcraft, with strong focus on the disproportionately influential work of Egyptologist Margaret Murray (1863-1963), which was partially incorporated into Gerald Gardner's extraordinarily successful Wicca.

Doyle White perceptively notes that while some left Wicca when they discovered its history was fabricated, others were comfortable with the constructed nature of their religion. Alternative genealogies were proposed by various writers after Gardner's death in 1964. and alternative genealogies for witchcraft were proposed via folklore and British traditions (Robert Cochrane), Satanism (Montague Summers), traditional witchcraft and cunning men (Andrew Chumbley), and Middle Eastern esotericism (Rollo Ahmed), for example. American Wiccan Aidan Kelly pioneered the critique of Gardnerian Wicca as the continuation of pre-Christian religion, and in 1999 British historian Ronald Hutton published *Triumph of the Moon*, a carefully researched text that exploded the historicity of Wicca and received an ambiguous response from academic and Pagan audiences alike. Doyle White notes that other European scholars – most notably Carlo Ginzburg – offered different explanations of witchcraft phenomena, and that Satanist genealogies are notably separate from general witchcraft histories or traditions.

Chapter 2, "Liberation," opens with the idea that identifying as a witch is a "countercultural act" (p. 26), which had persuasive power since Romanticism in the eighteenth century. The figure of the witch became important in post-1960s feminism, with important authors like Barbara Ehrenreich and Andrea Dworkin writing in defence of witches, while post-Christian authors like Mary Daly and Pagans including Zsuzsanna Budapest and Starhawk co-opted the witch as an image of female empowerment. The "queering" of witches followed, with Gardner's prescriptive heteronormativity being set aside by groups including the Minoan Brotherhood and the Radical Faeries (who are not mentioned). Recent disputes between groups who support sex-based rights and those that want to include transwomen are covered, as are the African traditions of Hoodoo, Obeah, Santería, and the emergence of the "Black Witch" movement, initiated by Lakeesha Harris in 2015. The role of decolonization methodologies for

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Black, White, and Indigenous practitioners of witchcraft are touched on, and the power of digital media like Twitter and TikTok is acknowledged.

Chapter 3, “Power,” opens with a consideration of “the allure of witchcraft” (p. 44), and traverses the academic disputes between Catholics and Protestants in the early modern era over witchcraft, which shifts into a consideration of academic use of witchcraft as an etic or emic term. The power of the Enlightenment as a rationalist, disenchanting movement, and the way that post the Enlightenment definitions and practice of magic changed to accord more with the demands of rationality (Aleister Crowley’s idea that magic is “the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will” [p. 47], for example). The ethics of witchcraft (cursing, hexing, witches against Donald Trump – which Doyle White connects to Gardner’s workings against Adolf Hitler - and so on), are considered as are the issues of the appeal of secrecy, the esoteric, and elite knowledge. The “Conclusions” reviews the material and offers some cautious thoughts about the future of witchcraft in the contemporary world. *The New Witches of the West* is an important publication: it is highly intellectual and immersed in historiography; it is thoughtful and deserving of a wide readership; and it is accessible to undergraduate students and non-specialist readers. I recommend it heartily.

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SANJA NILSSON, *CHILDREN IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS* (CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE ELEMENTS, 2024); ISBN: 2635-232X (EPDF); II; 60 PP.; RRP: US\$20.00.

Keywords: children, New Religious Movements, education, family structures

Sanja Nilsson's *Children in New Religious Movements* opens briskly with an account of the raids and child removals (giving rise to charges) from the Qahal Yahweh Assembly of St. James, Jamaica in 2019. She notes that the study of children in new and minority religions is an emergent field, and that there are difficulties due to tabloid journalists' sensationalism about "cults" and the perceived connection to child abuse (whether sexual, forced labour, corporal punishment, forced marriage, or denial of education, to name but a few). Chapter 2, "Situating the Concept of Childhood," opens with Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962), which has been critiqued but is still a yardstick in the field. Historical ideas such as children being miniature adults, the issue of parental love for and investment in their children, and practices including child abandonment, are sketched. Nilsson considers nineteenth century communes like the Oneida Community, the Bishop Hill Colony and the Brook Farm Community as example of non-traditional family structures and parenting styles. She shifts to modern new religions including Unificationism and the Family (formerly Children of God), and discusses ideas of purity (drawing on Mary Douglas and William Paden) in a range of movements including Knutby Filadelfia, the Bruderhof, and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Chapter 3, "Socialization and Social Relations: Family Life in the Religious Life World of the Child," opens with the sociological ideas of Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) regarding the natural attitude in the life world, which assumes "that actions and events taking place in the outer world are interpreted by others in the same way we ourselves interpret them" (p. 19). In some religious groups the social world is far removed from outside society, causing issues for children who must negotiate both. Religious groups where children are cared for by adults who are not their parents is briefly covered. Chapter 4, "Education," is a continuation of the socialization process; the restricted education of Swedish Exclusive Brethren children is discussed, as are the Jehovah's Witnesses' practices for keeping children separate even as they attend state schools. The various scandals accompanying the International Society for Krishna Consciousness' boarding schools – "sexual exploitation, corporal punishment, poor health-care, and mental abuse" (p. 26) - are covered, and the subsequent legal cases and departure by second generation ISKCON members. The different pathways of Waldorf schools (based on the anthroposophical ideas of Rudolf Steiner) and Applied Scholastics (the education system developed by L. Ron Hubbard and favoured in Scientology) are also noted.

Chapter 5, "Healthcare," covers the New Age idea of Indigo and Crystal Children, explores mental health and neurodivergence, and specific flashpoints like Christian Science parents resisting Western medicine, and Scientologists rejecting psychiatry. Chapter 6, "Custody and Abuse: Case Studies," stresses the uniqueness of each group Nilsson focuses on (some are mentioned above, new case studies include Branch Davidians, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and Peoples Temple). A range of terrible offences are noted (sexual abuse, violence, the mass death of children at Jonestown, and sexual shaming, among others). Chapter 7, "Concluding Observations," makes good points about globalization and the intersection of different ideas about childhood, family structure, education, and the role of religion that result from our more interconnected world. This Element is another solid contribution to the series; it

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is accessible to a wide readership and will be attractive to educators, students, and interested general readers.

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Michael Stausberg, Stuart A. Wright, and Carole M. Cusack (eds), *The Demise of Religions: How Religions End, Die or Dissipate*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020; ISBN: 9781350162914; 208 pages; \$115.00 hardback; \$39.95 paperback; also Bloomsbury Open Access, [https:// www.bloomsburycollections.com/](https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/).

The Demise of Religions begins with a short introduction outlining what is meant by demise and to what extent in religion and new religious movements can this decline be measured. There are several examples of new religious movements in this edition, including Knutby Filadelfia, the Panacea Society and the Rajneeshis. The contributors superbly bring together these examples to create a comprehensive depiction of the rise and fall of a range of new religious movements. Throughout the book, various contributors offer several explanations for the decline and ultimate disappearance of new religions movements, some of which include failed prophecy, generational socialisation, and replacement. In doing so the reader is provided with an extensive overview of the current landscape of new religious movements and their decline.

The book offers an example of the strengths of interdisciplinary work with each chapter complementing the next and adding to the reader's understanding in a timely manner. Moreover, as the book draws upon various historical and geographical accounts there is a tangible link throughout all of them, which underpins the theoretical accounts given to portray the life cycle of the movements. The reader is skilfully guided through the cases studies each offering a new viewpoint. When collected the case studies contribute to a well-rounded analysis of new religious movements. For example, Joel Robbins' chapter provides an anthropological starting point exploring how religion is bound in the culture of a given society, and a key contributing factor for the demise of religion is predicated on the breakdown of rules and norms of behaviour. Jessica Johnson's chapter provides a pertinent investigation of the role of technology in the fall of Mars Hill Church. The use of online media enabled various previous and current members of the church to voice their experiences of abuse within Mars Hill, and so demonstrates new threats to the lifespan of new religious movements. This chapter adds to the emergent literature on technology's role in religion and new religious movements by subtly offering an examination of how technology may be used to empower members (especially women) against the institution.

These chapters provide a nuanced understanding of the social, political and economic structures that contribute to the understanding of these movements. The book contributes to NRM literature beyond previously generalised notions of secularisation and in turn, adds to the scholarly landscape by offering a multidisciplinary approach. For example, Stuart A. Wright's chapter considers the role of state interventions in religious communities, whereas Erica Baffelli's analysis of Aum Shinrikyo's demise in relation to perceived threats by the police is a sociological perspective to be utilised. The utilisation of a multifaceted approach provides the reader with a thorough understanding of the steps towards the subsequent demise of new religious movements. The adoption of this approach responds to the wider calls for religious studies to diversify its approach in order to assess the changing ways in which individuals create, consume, and negotiate their religious or non-religious identities.

This volume has arrived in a timely manner; in a time when new religious movements in their various iterations are consistently emerging, having an awareness of why and how these occur is essential. Developing such an awareness should be not only from an academic perspective, but also for

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the layperson it offers a practical element. This is a key strength of the volume, as previous exploration of NRMs have not put the lived experience at the heart of the analysis, whether this be psychological, social or economic experience. A chapter where this is most evidently seen is Cusack and Lewis' study of violent murder and suicide, which explores the examples of Jonestown, the Order of the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate, and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. The chapter identifies commonalities between how and why these movements ultimately ended with suicide and murder. The contributors point towards the death of the charismatic leader as a significant contributing factor in the movement's demise, as well as other exogenous factors such as negative publicity. Each movement offers a unique selling point to their members, who are able to pick and choose to what best suits their needs.

One area for consideration may be the definitional problem of delineating between the various examples used. Although the opening chapter offers a vocabulary toolkit the subsequent chapters move between religion and new religious movements without much explanation of how these categories differ. However, I would argue this issue is not be solely a problem for the authors, but reflects the wider field of religious studies. A key take-away of this volume is that religion and new religious movements now operate in a saturated market, and their lifespan is not as secure as in previous iterations of NRMs. External and internal factors threaten the development and longevity of these movements, ranging from the death of charismatic leader to political and economic struggles. What is clear however is that new religious movements continue to exist in today's consumerist culture, and so this collection of case studies offers a vital foundation for subsequent study to build on.

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