

Volume 10, Number 1, September 2013

Extension

Taking it further: new religious movements

Jon Mayled

Although much has been written and said about new religious movements (NRMs), the definition of what constitutes an NRM is not clear. Wikipedia provides a technical definition (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_religious_movements).

It might be worth questioning at what point the idea of NRMs evolved. For instance, might it be possible to argue that at one point in the first century CE, Christianity was an NRM? Looking back at the definition it would seem that it would meet most of the criteria: it appeared out of Judaism and was rejected by that religion for not sharing the 'same basic creed'. This is not to say that Jesus of Nazareth intended anything more than a revitalising of Judaism but certainly his followers, particularly in the teachings of Paul, did create a new creed and faith.

Academics tend not to recognise denominations of a faith as NRMs, although Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists and Shakers have all been recognised as NRMs. So do the early Jewish followers of Jesus count as an NRM, or were they simply a denomination?

A similar issue arises with Sikhism — at what point was it an NRM and when did it become a 'separate' religion to the extent that it has a different creed to Islam and Hinduism?

Presumably, there is a point at which an NRM becomes an established religion: most people would say that the Bahá'í Faith is a separate religion and not a denomination of Islam.

Should we judge when an NRM becomes a religion by its success, perhaps by its number of adherents?

Although many people regard it as a joke, there are well over half a million people in the world who assert that they are Jedi knights. It is difficult to see exactly what religion they are differing from and one might question whether Jedi will ever be recognised as a religion in its own right.

NRMs are frequently criticised, such as David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. However, Scientology is now recognised as a religion in many countries.

Despite the criticisms of NRMs, particularly by fundamentalist groups within 'mainstream' religions, the key to understanding them surely lies in the name: they are new *religious* movements. If they constitute people's deeply held beliefs, should we not regard them with the same respect as we give to all other faiths?