

Religious Movements and the
New Age: Their Relevance to the
Environmental Movement in the 1990s

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1 - Introduction

1.1 - About This Report

This report was commissioned by Greenpeace (UK) from the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Lancaster University.

Its aims are:

- to give an overview of the phenomenon of new religious movements¹ as it has developed over the last thirty years in Western industrialised societies;
- to illuminate some of the connections between this phenomenon and other social and cultural changes that have taken place over the same period; and
- to summarise and appraise the different theories that attempt to explain, and to assess the social significance of, the explosion of new religious movements.

In the light of these findings, the report also aims:

- to identify the major points of relevance of the new religious movements to the environmental movement in general, and to environmental non-governmental organisations in particular; and
- to assess the likely future development of this phenomenon.

1.2 - Summary of the Report

The report argues that:

- **The new religious movements (NRMs) need to be understood as part of a larger story of cultural and social change, of which new social movements (NSMs) such as the environmental movement are a major part (sections 2.1 - 2.4).**
- **The NRMs and the NSMs are social phenomena concerned with the production of symbols and vocabularies which challenge the dominant understandings of contemporary society. Although 1970s NRMs did this in very different ways to the NSMs - through hierarchical forms of organisation and dogmatic belief systems - more recently, most notably in the 'New Age' movements, the two have tended to converge (section 2.5).**
- **The NRMs and the NSMs can be seen as being produced by contradictions and tensions in modern society, particularly between the social logics operating in the public and private spheres. However, they are also involved in the creative use of the vocabularies that contemporary existence provides, such as new understandings of the self, in order to explore how to transform, or to better live with, such contradictions (section 3).**
- **NRMs can be divided into different groupings, according to the kind of relationship they have with practices in wider society. In particular, the world-rejecting movements seek the sacred through a new social order, while the world-accepting movements seek it through aspects of the existing social order (section 4.1). While the 1970s NRMs were fairly evenly distributed between the types (section 4.2), the New Age movements tend to be world-accepting (section 4.3).**
- **Environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), like the rest of the environmental movement, owe their existence to the same kind of social and cultural processes as the NRMs, but have developed in a way which increasingly threatens to insulate them from such processes. This risks undermining the vital cultural functions that the NGOs have performed, and undercutting much of their support as new groups emerge which may be better placed to benefit from these dynamics (section 5).**

1.3 - Three Preliminary Points

Before going on to the substance of the report, three crucial points have to be made, if the NRMs are to be grasped in their full significance for contemporary society.

- Firstly, the specific religious movements, such as ISKCON (the Hare Krishna Movement), Wicca, or the Unification Church (the Moonies), which are prominent either on our high streets or in the media, are numerically relatively small

(at any one time there are perhaps 15,000 full-time members of such organised NRMs in Britain, interpreting full-time strongly).²

Less obvious, but arguably far more significant, are more general religious movements. These can range from individuals who identify in some way with an organised NRM

(there are at least 8,000 'graduates' from courses held by one NRM in Britain - *est* - alone),³

through informal networks of like-minded groups and individuals

(one survey estimated that there are 250,000 people who identify themselves as neo-pagans in Britain),⁴

to even more general shifts in religious sensibilities such as the New Age

(some researchers claim that as many as 10 per cent of the American population identify with the movement).⁵

- Secondly, it is only against a wider historical background - a background of related social and cultural changes that have taken place within Western societies over the last thirty years - that the full significance of the NRMs can clearly be seen. Section 2 will illustrate this point through briefly charting the linked histories of:

- the countercultural movements of the 1960s,
- the new social movements of the 1970s and beyond,
- the NRMs that emerged in the 1970s, and
- New Age forms of religiosity.

Later on, in section 3, these developments will be placed against a yet broader context of more general social and cultural change over the last thirty years.

- Thirdly, there is always a danger that the abstract and detached sociological language employed here might *obscure* as much as illuminate the human realities subsumed under the name 'NRMs'. The fact that sociology can use typologies and socio-historic explanations to grasp NRMs as a cultural phenomenon can only mistakenly be understood as meaning that the beliefs and practices that make up new forms of religiosity have been explained away - that they are 'just' the products of socio-economic change, for example.

The report will argue this point on two levels:

- At the *social* level, NRMs should not just be seen as the blind outworking of social and cultural change. They are better understood as creative cultural experiments, both manifesting, and contributing to, wider learning processes taking place in society as a whole.
- At the *individual* level, NRM members are not always simply reacting to social circumstance, or retreating from reality (they are arguably, on average, no more gullible or unthinking than non-members). However flawed some of the chosen paths might be, we are dealing here with very real attempts, using and adapting the languages and tools that are available, to explore and articulate dimensions of human existence which are denied any significance by the major institutions - arguably, even by the religious institutions - of modern society.

During the more historical and sociological analyses that follow, this should always be kept firmly in mind.

2 - The New Religious Movements in their Historical Context

As suggested above, the phenomenon of the new religious movements can best be understood as one element in a larger story which incorporates a number of cultural developments in the industrialised West over the last thirty years. This section explores the main strands of this recent history, starting with the events of the 1960s.

2.1 - The 1960s Countercultural Movements

From the middle of the 1960s to the early 1970s Western societies experienced an explosion of cultural and political experimentation, largely among the young middle-classes. Although **'the counterculture'** remains a useful shorthand way of referring to the events of this era, its cultural vitality and variety really defy such simplification. A number of elements can be seen as having been brought together in numerous and varied combinations - an explosion of interest in oriental mysticism (most publicly, with the Beatles' involvement with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), the widespread use of psychoactive drugs (apotheosised by the scientist Timothy Leary's injunction to 'turn on, tune in and drop out'), new social spaces in which to explore personal experiences and new forms of social relationship (pop festivals, 'happenings' and communes), and a new style of political radicalism (the student movement, the New Left, May 1968, and so on).⁶

Much of this can be seen as recapitulating older themes in Western culture, particularly among the Romantics and Transcendentalists of nineteenth century England and North America respectively. But what was distinctively new was the numerical strength of this cultural shift. Large proportions of a whole generation seemed to be reacting against the priorities of post-war society, and refusing - or at least hesitating - to take up their expected role in the instrumental, bureaucratised world of late twentieth century capitalism. The 1960s generation, at least for a time, strove for a simple life, less dependent upon material goods and social status, and valuing spontaneity and freedom of expression in new ways.

With the early 1970s the transformative promise of this era seemed to have collapsed.⁷ But many of the impulses which it represented were then taken up and carried forward by newer forces - the new social movements (including, strikingly, what became the environmental movement) and new religious movements of the 1970s and beyond. In particular, the counterculture, perhaps more than any previous movement, had operated through "challeng[ing] the dominant codes of everyday life",⁸ through providing new ways of experiencing the world, and new vocabularies, rather than by directly trying to alter it materially. This mode of action was taken up by the successor movements of the 1970s, to which we now turn - in section 2.2, briefly, to what have come to be called the new social movements, and then, in sections 2.3 and 2.4, to the new religious movements.

2.2 - The New Social Movements

The NSMs - the peace, women's, gay and environmental movements - represented one way of taking the cultural change of the 1960s forward, after the counterculture's failure to transform society at one blow. The **feminist movement**,⁹ itself splitting into different factions as the 1970s and 1980s progressed, emerged and proceeded by way both of the critique and reform of existing practices and institutions (socialist and liberal feminism), and of the creation of new forms of identity and community (radical and cultural feminism), explored, for example, through lesbian separatism and feminist spirituality, notably in such experiments as the Greenham women's camp.

The **environmental movement**, too, can be pictured as carrying forward countercultural ideals in a new direction. While its more obviously political wing¹⁰ - the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and direct action groups - has been concerned with the reform or even transformation of the industrial system, the *de facto* cause of so much ecological destruction, its cultural wing - green communes, the deep ecology movement, ecofeminism, and so on¹¹ - operates more at the level of identity and community, through experimentation at the level of everyday life.

But even the political wing of the movement can be seen to have been engaged in issues of symbol and identity. It has had to invent and promote new ways of describing what are often very familiar features of modern life - such as cars, timber and tourism - in order to constitute them as environmental issues. And it has fostered processes of collective identity formation - whereby people have come to identify themselves as, for example, 'green' - in order to become a movement at all.

As we shall see in section 2.5, these concerns for symbol and identity are characteristics which, amongst others, mark the NSMs and NRMs out as closely related cultural phenomena.

2.3 - The New Religious Movements - The 1970s

The early 1970s saw the emergence of a plethora of more or less organised **new religious movements** in Western societies (what were called *specific* NRMs in section 1.3). Many of these had been in existence for some time, but after the disappointment of the failure of the 1960s countercultural movements (either political or cultural) to transform society, and after the broader cultural transformations - discussed in section 3.1 - of which such movements were a manifestation, they found fertile ground for expansion. The NRMs thus became one of the main vehicles for the search for significance in modern life - largely, it has to be said, for the young white middle-classes. Only the Rastafarian movement has recruited mainly from ethnic minorities in Britain.¹²

Contemporary NRMs generally fall into one of a number of categories, depending on the predominant source of their ideas. The neo-oriental NRMs take their ideas from Asian religions. Indeed, many were founded by charismatic Indian gurus who came to the West - initially to the USA - during the late 1960s or early 1970s. Examples of these are ISKCON (the Hare Krishna Movement), the Divine Light Mission (founded by Guru Maharaj Ji), the Rajneesh movement (also known as the Orange People, or the Sanyassins, founded by Bhagwan Rajneesh), and Transcendental Meditation (founded by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi). ISKCON and DLM have somewhere between 100 and 1,000 adherents each, whereas thousands of people have been involved with the Rajneesh movement and TM.¹³

Neo-Christian NRMs include the fundamentalist Children of God, founded in the USA, and the Unification Church (the Moonies), which also takes some elements from Far Eastern religion. Both of these expect absolute devotion to the movement from its members, and have an active membership in Britain numbering in the hundreds. The Charismatic Renewal Movement, on the other hand, is a loose network of groups and individuals within the major Christian denominations, and outside of them, which aims to reinvigorate Christian worship through an active experience of Divine power - most commonly, through 'speaking in tongues'.¹⁴

The psychological NRMs are those which have combined elements of the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic traditions with Eastern or Western mysticism in order to create what have been called "self-religions",¹⁵ offering spiritual technologies of self-transformation. Scientology, (founded by the science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard in 1954) is a full-blown religion, with at least thousands of British members¹⁶, to whom it offers the possibility of parapsychological powers. Scientology's offshoots *est* and Exegesis, and similar movements like Insight - all of whom have 'trained' thousands of individuals in Britain through their seminars and courses - operate more like businesses than religions in the conventional sense. Nevertheless, all of these, and more general psychological NRMs like the Human Potential Movement,¹⁷ hold out the promise of a transformation of human subjectivity which amounts to the divination of the self. Their therapies claim to liberate the individual's true 'Self', generally prevented from direct engagement with the world by internalised habits and belief systems. Exactly what are the true Self's powers varies between the self-religions, but for many these involve nothing less than magical powers - the creation of one's own reality.¹⁸

Many of the neo-oriental NRMs have absorbed this tradition (having, as it does, many oriental roots). Notable among these are Rajneeshism and Transcendental Meditation, for whom what were originally devotional practices within major religious traditions have become reformulated as spiritual technologies, as means for self-transformation.

Finally, there are the UFO cults, which took their ideas from post-war science-fiction. Scientology itself combined its psychological ideas with a belief in extra-terrestrial civilisations and time-travel,¹⁹ but there are also a number of NRMs more focused on UFOs, notably the Aetherius Society and the Raëlians, who both claim to be in communication with extra-terrestrials.²⁰

2.4 - The New Religious Movements - The 1980s and 1990s

During the 1980s many commentators reported a decline in NRM activity. Certainly, many of the more exclusive kind of cults suffered for a number of reasons. Economic *recession* meant that young people were less likely to take the risk of taking time out from any career they might want to develop. Many cults - notably Rajneeshism, Scientology and the Unification Church - experienced organised *opposition*, both from the state, and from a strengthening anti-cult movement, much of the impetus for which came from the established churches.

But in other ways the 1980s and 1990s have seen a strengthening and proliferation of new forms of religiosity. Much of this can be seen as elements of what has come to be known as the '**New Age**', a term which has been in use since the early 1970s. Rather like the 1960s counterculture, the New Age movement is a very loose collection of groups, ideas and practices. In particular, it tries to fuse together many of the themes of the last twenty five years - from the Human Potential Movement and the self-religions, from the ecology movement and the other new social movements, from certain scientific ideas (notably quantum physics, chaos theory, neurobiology, and systems ecology), from the natural health movement, and from oriental traditions. All of these (and more - notably a resurgent interest in Buddhism and neo-paganism²¹) are inserted into an overall idea of social change through personal transformation, and of the convergence of all of the various mystical and scientific traditions into a new world religion, based on the unity of humanity and respect for nature.²²

There are a number of things to notice about the New Age movement. Firstly, the sheer range of religious and quasi-religious practices being engaged in is quite staggering. Wearing crystals, channelling spirits, searching for corn circles and ley lines, regressing to past lives, consulting astrologers and dowzers, going on the ever-burgeoning number of available retreats, practising shamanic techniques - all of these and many more count as New Age practices. 1980s and 1990s religiosity tends to be of a 'pick and mix' type, rather than a question of accepting a dogmatic list of tenets.²³ Even Christianity partly displays this general move towards a consumer-led kind of religion, with a decline in denominational loyalty, and a growth in monastic retreats, charismatic worship, and other vehicles to spiritual experience.²⁴

Secondly, *unlike* the counterculture, and many of the NRMs that came into prominence in the 1970s, New Age practices tend to be those that are not incompatible with also keeping one's place in mainstream society (New Age travellers are an exception to this). Indeed, as we shall see in section 4.1, many of them are engaged with in order to enhance one's performance at work and in other

areas of life.²⁵ This could be seen as a new pragmatism in a period of economic difficulty. The New Agers still place a value on social change. But now it is of the evolutionary, rather than the revolutionary, kind.

2.5 - Summary of Section 2

Section 2 has represented many of the cultural movements of the last three decades - the countercultural movements of the 1960s, the new religious movements that have been a constant, if changing, part of Western societies since the early 1970s, and new social movements such as the environmental movement - as part of a larger, more or less unified story of cultural change. It is perhaps easiest to grasp this through a consideration of what features NRMs share with NSMs, and in what ways they differ.

NRMs can be seen to share two features of NSMs:²⁶

- they typically challenge mainstream society at the level of symbol and communication, rather than by direct aspirations to political power, and
- they favour prefigurative over instrumental action (how they organise and relate to each other is at least as important as what they 'achieve').

The NRMs and the NSMs, then, are not just innovative but also, in some way, *transformative*. They are all concerned with radically altering some aspect of modern life - not just directly, and materially, but also by changing the meanings that we give to our experiences of the world.

But when we turn to two other characteristics of the NSMs - their decentralised structure and concern with issues of global justice²⁷ - the NRMs that emerged in the 1970s are clearly quite different.

- The NSMs characteristically consist of subterranean networks of groups and spaces within which new ways of living can be invented and explored, and typically organise through participatory democracy and consensus. By contrast, the NRMs have tended to favour a clearly hierarchical organisation with a charismatic leadership and a fixed set of beliefs.²⁸
- While the moral orientation of NSMs focuses on the communicative negotiation and articulation of global issues of justice and emancipation, that of NRMs has been characterised more by the adherence of individual behaviour to received and unquestioned moral codes.²⁹

The NSMs and the NRMs can thus be seen as different manifestations of a common social process. Both kinds of movement have operated largely through intervening in the symbols and descriptions through which society understands the world, and through the creation of different kinds of social relationships, but the way they have done this has been quite distinct.

This can be seen in the different ways in which NSMs and NRMs have carried forward the 1960s contestation of the boundary between private and public. In the 1960s, the emphasis was on challenging that distinction by injecting notions of care and authenticity, normally confined to the private realm of family and friendship, into the public sphere of work and politics. In the 1970s and 1980s, the emphasis of the new social movements was more on the radicalisation and extension of the public values of open communication and abstract justice into private realms usually opaque to such values - into familial and sexual relations, and into the large institutions of contemporary society (sometimes, ironically, called "public"). But both strategies remain part of the repertoire of contemporary radical politics. The freedoms made possible by the modern private-public split - acceptance for who one is in the private realm, and open, democratic discussion in the public - can be extended into newer and newer areas.

By contrast, in some new religious movements, such as the Hare Krishnas and the Unification Church³⁰ the private-public boundary is contested through the creation of an enclave of the faithful in which the boundary is blurred, where economic activity, relaxation - indeed all aspects of life - are integrated into a "total institution",³¹ governed by a unified set of norms. So whereas the NSMs have proceeded by *radicalising* contemporary freedoms, many NRMs represent the option of *dissolving* both of these freedoms within a different conception of human fulfilment.

However, more recently there has been something of a convergence between NSMs and NRMs.³² Indeed, with a more political and decentralist orientation amongst New Age, neo-pagan and therapeutic NRMs, and a more spiritual one amongst radical feminists and the deep ecological wing of the environmental movement, it often becomes impossible to make any useful distinction.³³

This convergence can be seen as part of a larger process of 'de-differentiation' occurring between religious and non-religious practices in contemporary society. Activities that traditionally would be classed as leisure or recreation on the one hand, or as professional development on the other, seem increasingly to be taking on religious characteristics. Conversely, practices which may originate in religious traditions are coming more and more to be undertaken largely for the psychological and material benefits they may produce.

The largely spontaneous and uncoordinated flourishing in Britain of the Chinese martial art of T'ai Chi - today there are thousands of practitioners, and often several professional teachers operating in even small cities - is emblematic

of the convergence of the spiritual and the recreational. In Britain T'ai Chi occupies an ambiguous position between being a healthy and relaxing form of exercise on the one hand, and a dynamic, meditative form of spirituality on the other. Although one teacher might emphasise the former and another the latter, many practitioners would not make any sharp distinction between the two.³⁴

Similarly, management training programmes, even those used by such mainstream companies as Cunard Ellerman and Pacific Bell, are increasingly incorporating spiritual-therapeutic techniques of self-transformation and empowerment which stand in a clear lineage from the self-religions of the 1970s. One survey of 500 owners and presidents of companies in California found that a majority had participated in such courses.³⁵ In Britain, TV AM was particularly notable in this regard for the participation in Insight training seminars of its managing director and many of its staff.³⁶

This de-differentiation of 'religious' and 'worldly' practices seems to be a trend which is set to continue in the immediate future. We shall explore it further in section 4, using a typology of NRMs to explore how this has emerged over the last two decades. But first, in section 3, we will look at how the different explanations that have been put forward for the cultural changes outlined in section 2 can be used to shed light on their significance.

3 - Understanding the New Religious Movements

3.1 - Why they Happened

It would be too simplistic to see NRMs simply as reactions against contemporary existence. Many aspects of them can more usefully be seen as a continuation and radicalisation of trends in modern life - indeed, as we shall see in section 4.1, some actually sacralise and celebrate such trends. The same dichotomy can be seen in explanations for the cultural shift of which the NRMs were a part.

One kind of theory sees the counterculture, and the successor movements, as **reactive** - as reacting against the dominant cultural trajectories of twentieth century society. For some theorists, modern life was simply too impoverished, rational, controlled, and emotionally frustrating.³⁷ For others, it was rather the collapse of the dominant values of society that forced the individual to find other means of psychic support,³⁸ in the NRMs. But for all of these first kind of theorists the counterculture was exactly that - a culture of reaction.

Another kind of explanation sees the NRMs, not as reacting to, but as **expressive** of, the dominant trends in society - towards secularisation, and the loss of any overarching meaning for human life. NRMs are thus not any sort of solution to the crisis in values, but yet another regrettable symptom of that crisis - a collapse into subjectivity, an overdeveloped concern for the self, and a consumerist attitude to beliefs and values.³⁹

Both of these types of explanation can be useful to us.⁴⁰ As suggested in section 2.5, *all* NRMs, to some extent, want to transform society, so that all of them can be called counter-movements. And all NRMs, inevitably, are a product of their time and culture - even if they employ 'alien' concepts and practices.

However, both the 'reactive' and the 'expressive' explanations, taken individually, are ultimately too pessimistic about the significance of NRMs. The former sees them as flights away from the problems of modern life, rather than as providing solutions to them. The latter, by contrast, see new religious movements as far too complicit in the *shortcomings* of contemporary life to have anything useful to offer by way of an answer.

A rounded view of NRMs would combine these two approaches and see them as responding to the contradictions of modern life with vocabularies that emerge out of those very contradictions. The next section will show how it was exactly the tension between the public and private realms in contemporary existence which provided a new vocabulary of the self, a new sense of who we are, with which to comprehend and challenge that contradiction. In this light, the NRMs can be seen as neither a flight from, or simply an indicator of, our present predicament, but as engaged in the creative rearticulation of its moral possibilities.

3.2 - New Senses of Self

Modern existence presents certain difficulties for the formation of a balanced, integrated self. Firstly, the deep division between the private and public realms sets up strains between conflicting ideas of how we should be. In the private sphere, we have to be intimate, honest, open, expressive and caring. In the public sphere, the contradictory values of rational, disciplined behaviour and competitive striving are demanded by the modern industrial and bureaucratic system.⁴¹ Even in the public sphere itself the modern self is typically fragmented into a number of roles. A teacher, for example, has to take on very different identities when she or he is in the classroom, in a staff-meeting, or out shopping.

Secondly, with the emergence of a secular public world functioning on the basis of efficiency and economic rationality rather than any unified sacred vision, and of an increased division of labour and of life-realms, a huge (some would say intolerable) burden has been placed on the self. Because the institutions of society no longer offer a sense of continuity and stability, the individual has to find that security in their own biographical unity. The self has thus had to perform more and more functions which once were the role of social institutions. The move towards a consumerist model of the provision of services - including religion - can be seen as part of this overburdening of the self with social functions. The proliferation of more and more areas of choice can be seen not so much a growth of freedom but an inflation and further complexification of the psychic structure of the self.

Thirdly, modern society has developed in such a way that values and commitments are seen as private, individual affairs with little claim on the running of public life. This view of moral judgements, as subjective and unamenable to rational discussion, is so prevalent today that we hardly even notice it as informing the way we think about morality.⁴² This state of affairs on the one hand burdens the self with the role of being the source of value and meaning (since it can no longer rely on social institutions such as the church to do so), but on the other denies that these values and meanings have any purchase beyond the private sphere.

But at the same time that modern life presents the self with these problems and dilemmas, it also provides means for articulating and confronting them. In particular, it has made possible a new *kind* of self. Instead of identifying themselves with any particular one of their social roles, Western individuals more and more identify themselves with a *private, inner self* behind whatever external roles they may occupy. As Daniel Yankelovich puts it, "ours is the first era when tens of millions of people offer as moral justification for their acts the idea that an inner and presumably more 'real' self does not fit well with their assigned social role."⁴³

This 'expressive' idea of the self, of a true, inner self, the mere finding of which would solve all problems about what one should do,⁴⁴ is one which was popularised by the countercultural movements of the 1960s, but has spread to increasing proportions of Western populations,⁴⁵ and to wider and wider areas of modern life, as survey material has shown. Marital relationships are understood less through concepts of duties to others, and more in terms of self-fulfilment and interdependence.⁴⁶ Judgements of other people are conducted in languages which are less moral, and more psychological.⁴⁷ Work and career are approached more and more in terms of self-fulfilment, rather than conformity to expectations or simple material gain.⁴⁸ And, as we have seen, "self-religions" have arisen which radicalise this expressive idea of the self, treating it as the site of sacrality and salvation. Thus the new religious movements can be seen as both inheriting this new sense of self, and propelling it forward into new articulations.

The growth of the environmental movement in the 1970s can also be seen as part of this shift to an expressive notion of self, and the values that tend to accompany it. The concern for quality-of-life issues, the political style with an expressive rather than an instrumental focus, and the "critique of the technoscientific rationale of industrial society"⁴⁹ all point to the implication of environmentalism in the emergence of what have been called "post-material values".⁵⁰

Although it was the differentiation of the spheres of modern life which made an expressive understanding of the self *possible* (by fragmenting the public self into a number of roles, and stabilising a private self through the modern nuclear family), one can nevertheless identify a number of social factors that assisted its emergence in the post-war period. As many theorists point out, changes in the patterns of bringing up children, particularly among the middle-classes, had led to a **new childhood**, characterised by egalitarian and liberal values - by a heightened sense of the individual as an end in his or herself, and by consensual rather than authoritarian styles of decision making. From this perspective, the counterculture occurred when the post-war baby-boom generation took their parent's *private* values out into the *public* world and found it wanting, so was more an accusation of hypocrisy than a real conflict of values.⁵¹

A number of other social developments encouraged the development of these private values, and their generalisation into areas of public life. Post-war **affluence** was making it possible for individuals to demand of their adult life that it provided greater fulfilment than merely *material* security.⁵² The huge expansion in **education** led to a generalisation of critical thought and liberal values.⁵³ The **reduction in working hours** and subsequent increase in leisure time increased the importance of the private sphere. And the rise of the '**expressive professions**' of the service sector (teaching, therapy - even retail and financial services) increased the value put on sensitivity, and facility in interpersonal relations.⁵⁴

But another, wider social change can be seen as underlying the new sense of self, and linking it with the global moral perspective of the new social

movements. The **globalisation** of economics, politics, the mass media and tourism have tended to erode particularist and localist understandings of identity, and to encourage the development of what Emile Durkheim called the "cult of man" - the sacralisation of an abstract "humanity", understood to underlie the differences between individual human beings.⁵⁵

This has to be understood in both an individual and a collective sense. On the individual level, it points to the expressive notion of a self detached from the contingent particularities of birth, and ultimately to the sacralisation of the self that the "self-religions" represent.⁵⁶ But on the collective level it can be seen as encouraging a concern for universalistic issues - human survival, human rights, and the global environment. In a counter-intuitive way the radical individualisation of modern life thus leads to global consciousness.⁵⁷ Under conditions of social globalisation, an abstract self is seen as equivalent, and so somehow connected, to other abstract selves, and concern for one is linked with concern for all.

To see this as an inevitable development would be unjustifiably utopian. But certainly in the convergence between New Age spirituality and new social movement politics described above, this does indeed seem to be occurring. The New Age beliefs in the sacred power within, and in an emergent global religion,⁵⁸ are entirely homologous with the NSM emphasis on personal empowerment, and on "thinking globally", and for many individuals are one and the same.

The new religious movements can be seen as exploring the nature of this contemporary condition. As suggested in section 2.5, while the NRMs of the 1970s tended to seek to reinsert the self into an authoritative religious tradition, and into a substantive community, contemporary NRMs increasingly operate within the vocabulary of the expressive self. This latter option involves not the face-to-face subjection to a charismatic leader, but the abstract participation in a common "humanity", of which we are all a part. Just as the new social movements seek to explore and articulate this new human condition through new modes of political association (network and affinity group) and action, the rituals and beliefs of the New Age do the same at the level of myth and self-empowerment.

3.3 - Summary of Section 3

This section has argued that the NRMs, however much they are generated by the contradictions and tensions of modern existence, should not be seen simply as either retreats from, or manifestations of, such contradictions. Many NRMs do perhaps attempt prematurely to heal these contradictions. But many do not, rather using and developing contemporary vocabularies in order to creatively explore how we can better live with them, or even transform them. And all can be seen as developing new sources of self - new ways of being individuals in the contemporary world. The next section, section 4, will explore the range of different possible relationships between NRMs and wider society, to show how they represent different kinds of response to the contradictions of modern life.

Section 4.1 introduces a typology of NRMs, and sections 4.2 and 4.3 show how it can be used to make sense of the 1970s NRMs, and of the contemporary New Age, respectively.

4 - New Religious Movements and Society

4.1 - A Typology of New Religious Movements

While all NRMs are to some extent mixtures of more than one category, it is useful, nevertheless, to attempt to divide them up according to a typological scheme. Unlike section 2.3, which divided up the NRMs according to the predominant source of their ideas, here we will categorise them according to their relationship with wider society. This will help us to make more sense of the dynamics of the phenomenon of new religiosity - in particular, of the different kinds of strategy for the exploration of sacral meaning in modern life that NRMs represent.⁵⁹

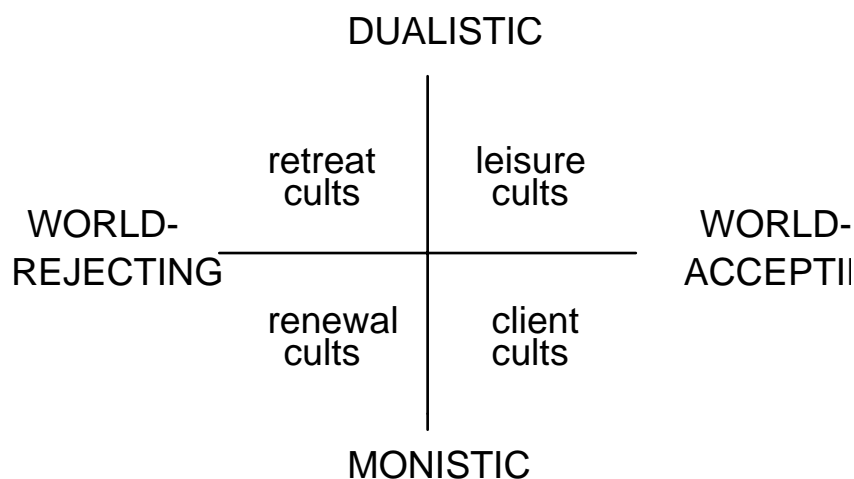


Figure 1

First, the major distinctions between the different kinds of NRM need to be spelt out. **Retreat cults**⁶⁰ and **renewal cults** are both world-rejecting in the sense that they take up a critical attitude towards wider society. As mentioned in section 3.1, all NRMs are critical of society in some way.⁶¹ But what I am calling 'world-rejecting' cults separate themselves off from the evil, fallen world in a way that the others do not.

Retreat cults are also dualistic in that they make a radical distinction between the impure, profane world outside the movement, and the purified, sacred enclave within, and concentrate on keeping the imperfections out. Renewal cults, on the other hand, are monistic in the sense that their critical stance towards society is directed into attempts to change it - ultimately, to abolish the boundary between cult and world by making the world like the cult (of course, in reality all

world-rejecting cults represent a blend in some proportions of retreat and renewal).

By contrast **client cults** and **leisure cults** are both world-accepting, in that they are predominantly uncritical of the major values and institutions of wider society. They neither seek consciously to change, nor to retreat from, the world. However, whereas client cults are monistic, so that they bring their beliefs and practices into their everyday lives, leisure cults are dualistic - they tend to separate off their spiritual activities into a private realm, separated from their working life.

4.2 - The Typology Applied to the Older NRMs

These distinctions can be illustrated using some of the movements mentioned in section 2.3. Again, it must be remembered that no movement will fit perfectly in only one of the four boxes (Figure 2).

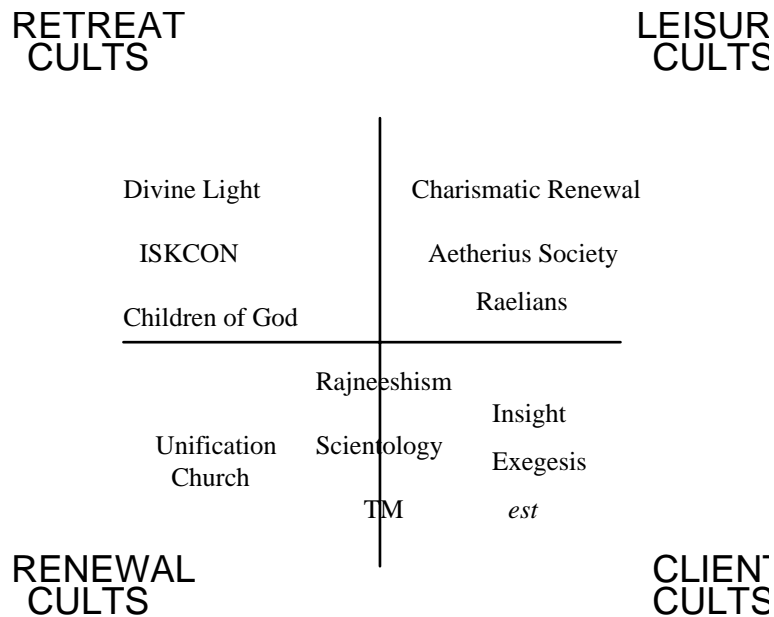


Figure 2

We can see these four different types of NRM as being four different strategies in the articulation of significance. The world-rejecting movements on the left hand side of Figure 2 can be seen as representing a reaction against existing society. Contemporary Western societies are seen as incapable of providing any sense of sacral significance, so that a new social order is sought. For the **retreat movements**, this alternative society is sought outside of the existing social order. For the **renewal movements**, it is the existing order that must be changed in order to find the new society.

The world-accepting movements on the right hand side, on the other hand, represent rather different strategies in the quest for meaning. Members of **leisure cults** can be seen as taking the divisions that exist in life in Western societies - public/private, work/leisure - and using them as a way of reinvesting their lives with (albeit part-time) sacrality. Although the public world of employment and politics is increasingly stripped of sacral meaning, and runs according to merely instrumental principles of technical efficiency, the clear distinctions made between the different arenas of modern life allow the investment of certain portions of life, certain spaces, certain times, with a quality that transcends the everyday. Leisure thus becomes a way of recharging the spiritual, not just physical, batteries - an opportunity for a clear experience of the transcendent, so absent from everyday life in Western societies.

Client cults also take aspects of the existing social order and use them as avenues for the search for significance, but in a very different way. With their idea of sacred power as something that comes from *within* the individual - not from *outside* as it does with the leisure cults - everyday life itself becomes the arena of spiritual development. Everyday challenges are seen as spiritual challenges, and success at work is seen as indicative of spiritual development.⁶² Unlike the leisure cults, client cults encourage the merging of the sacred and the secular. The pressure and competitiveness of the middle-class career becomes not a barrier to sacral significance but the vehicle for it. Spiritual development becomes modelled along exactly the same lines as career development in modern societies, involving courses, seminars, training, management, the learning of techniques. The guru-disciple relationship merges with the professional-client relationship.

Like the renewal cults, then, client cults represent the strategy of seeking sacral significance *within* the world, rather than in an enclave that has to be insulated *from* it. But, unlike the world-rejecting renewal cults, the world-accepting client cults seek that significance in the *existing social order*, rather than in a *transformed social order*.

These different kinds of NRM typically have very different relationships with their public. For the exclusive cult movements on the left hand side, both those of retreat and renewal, membership is all or nothing. An individual is either a member, or they are not. For the leisure cults, by contrast, membership is not so rigidly conceived. Because they dualistically separate the religion from the everyday world, members are not *just* members. They also have other roles in society. Membership of a leisure cult is typically part-time, voluntary, and revocable. For the client cults, the situation is different again. Unlike the retreat or renewal cults, they actually have something to sell. Thus one can be involved with the movement in a number of different ways, and to a number of different levels. This of course means that there are always likely to be far more members of world-accepting movements than there are of world-rejecting ones, simply because of the different conception of "membership" operating.

4.3 - The Typology Applied to 'New Age' Movements

If we turn to the New Age religiosities of the 1980s and 1990s, we can see a similar pattern, but with a different distribution of the various strategies to that of the 1970s (Figure 3).

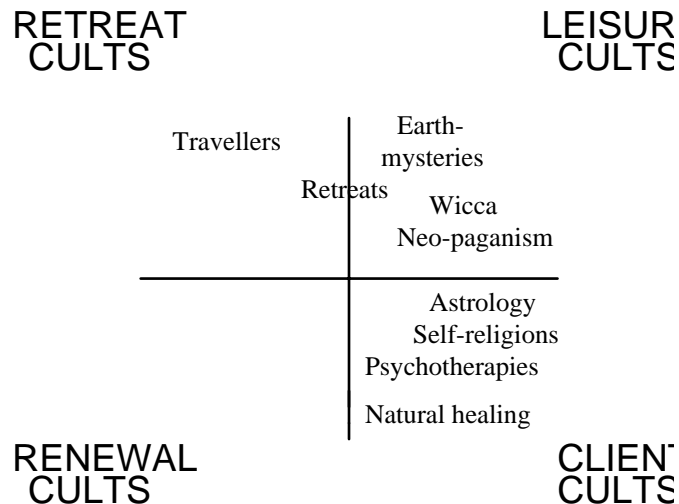


Figure 3

The most striking feature of Figure 3 is the shift away from the world-rejecting to the world-accepting movements. The 'New Age Travellers' are perhaps the clearest exception to this trend, but it is striking that at the large illegal festivals held in the summer of 1992 the ranks of the perhaps 10,000 full-time Travellers,⁶³ clearly a retreat cult, were swelled by many more leisure-culters - weekend travellers, and Rave music fans.

Of the earlier NRMs (not represented here), many are still relatively strong in Britain, but the social environment within which they are operating has changed. This can be seen in a number of ways. Firstly, the NRMs from the 1970s that have seemed to survive best have been the world-accepting ones - in particular, the self-religions. Secondly, many of the earlier NRMs have become more world-accepting themselves - either by becoming less like a sect and more like a church (leisure cult), or by operating more as a purveyor of services (client cult). Both scientology and the Rajneesh movement have, in different ways, undergone this transformation.

Thirdly, as suggested in section 2.4, the trend towards world-accepting movements in the last decade can be seen as a shift towards a different sort of involvement with movements. The typical NRM participant today is what Eileen Barker calls a "generalised self-seeker", concerned with developing their own

potential for work and relationships, rather than seeking a coherent world-view as offered by the earlier wave of NRMs.⁶⁴ They thus typically have little sense of 'brand loyalty' to a particular spiritual technology.⁶⁵ The services offered - whether astrology, counselling, or healing - are valued instrumentally, like consumable items, as resources for the development of the individual's personal biography, rather than as ends in themselves.

4.4 - Summary of Section 4

Section 4 has presented the NRMs as movements which seek the articulation of spiritual significance in modern life through the contesting of the dominant codes with which modern society understands the world. The different kinds of NRM represent different strategies towards that articulation. While the world-rejecting movements (renewal and retreat) pursue this through attempts to found a different kind of society, the world-accepting movements (leisure and client) do so through working with and radicalising the codes of mainstream society. Thus the world-rejecting movements can be seen as pointing, in what they reject, towards tensions and contradictions in contemporary society (as explored in section 3). By contrast, the world-accepting movements can be seen as more involved with indicating the potentials, lying within the fabric of modern life itself, for finding new ways of dealing with these tensions.

5 - Conclusion: The Implications for the Environmental Movement

What is the significance of all this for the environmental NGOs? Clearly the NGOs, like any other organisation, can usefully use the NRMs as indicators of broad social trends. The focuses and concerns of NRMs can tell one a lot about what is going on beneath the surface of a society - both through what they reject, and through what they celebrate.⁶⁶

But this report has also suggested that it would be a mistake to view the relationship between the NGOs and the new religious movements simply as an external one. Their shared origins, as cultural responses to the tensions and contradictions of contemporary life, mean that such an approach has particular dangers attached to it. This final section will attempt to point to some of those dangers.

The environmental movement, then, owes its existence as a social and cultural phenomenon to the same sorts of social processes - the groping attempts, both individual and collective, to reformulate the languages and symbols with which we understand the world - to those that lie behind the contemporary new religious movements. This is as true of NGOs such as Greenpeace as it is of the more obviously 'cultural' parts of the movement.

However, due to the very real successes achieved by the NGOs over the last decade, they have increasingly come to operate within the realm of the mainstream institutions of society - and, necessarily, to adopt the technocratic and physicalist languages which are the dominant currency of those institutions. This development has tended to suppress the cultural 'work' which had been done by the environmental campaigning organisations in earlier years, as producers of symbols and meanings - and to suppress the awareness that this is part of their role at all. The NGOs thus risk disconnecting themselves from the cultural processes which gave them birth, and have since given them so much buoyancy.

This point can be clarified by looking in turn at a number of the main functions that sociologists have identified as performed by new religious movements, both for the individuals that participate in them, and for wider society. In each case, similar or even identical functions can be found to apply to NSM groups. And in each case, important lessons can be drawn for the NGOs.

Functions for Society

It is perhaps significant that it is the *social* functions of NRMs that the NGOs are most likely to recognise as correlating with their own activity. Two such functions are particularly relevant.

- As sections 3 and 4 have tried to show, NRMs, like NSMs, can be seen as part of the way in which **society poses problems to itself** by throwing up phenomena which test its categories and institutions. Such activity on the part of NRMs can be defensive or offensive (resisting social change, or trying to initiate it), overt or implicit (consciously or unconsciously standing in critical relation to an aspect of wider society).

Whatever might be the case, there are at least two conditions for such a problem-posing claim to be successfully made. Firstly, the claim-making body must have a certain *autonomy* from the centres of power in society.⁶⁷ Secondly, the claim must be backed by the ability to confer *legitimacy* on the definition of a situation as being problematic.⁶⁸

There are issues for the NGOs in both of these areas. Their autonomy from political and economic institutions is by no means taken for granted today. Similarly, the movement towards a dependence on scientific modes of conferring legitimation, although conferring advantages in dealings with certain social institutions, can often alienate much potential support. Thus the first newsletter of the recently formed Social Ecology Network laments that "bastions of the Green Movement, such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, have become increasingly conservative and bureaucratic, and are generally failing to address the roots of the ecological crisis." The existence of such perceptions indicates that respectability has its costs as well as its benefits.

- Apart from any specific social problems that might be posed, NRMs, like NSMs, also act as **social laboratories** for the production of new ideas, values and ways of life, which can subsequently spread into wider society.⁶⁹

The environmental NGOs, too, as is well-known, have an important long-term role in shaping the general climate of attitudes and opinions in society. It seems important that they should not lose sight of the fact that, beyond their immediate goals, they have this wider cultural function - not so that they can instrumentally manipulate this dynamic to further their campaigning ability, but in order that this 'unintended' role - as sources of symbols and languages which wider society can appropriate - should be allowed to continue.

Functions for the Individual

It is when we turn to the functions that new religious movements perform for individuals that we can perhaps see most clearly the risks that the environmental NGOs could now run by insulating themselves from the cultural processes that helped give rise to them.

- For many individuals, membership of an NRM or NSM plays a large role in the **resolution of, or at least engagement with, ethico-psychological questions**. In the case of many of the 1970s new religious movements, subjection to clear codes of behaviour functioned to release the individual from anxiety about how they should behave, faced by the ethical pluralism of modern society.⁷⁰ With the new social movements and New Age NRMs, the situation is more complex. Individual choice is grounded not in received ethical codes but in an ongoing communicative process. Nevertheless, the result is similar - the moral choice of the individual is grounded in something that transcends her or his own subjectivity.

- NRMs offer an unthreatening context in which, and vocabularies with which, members can discuss and explore their religious experiences - their experience of the numinous and mysterious dimensions of existence, not taken seriously in other public discourses.⁷¹ In the same way, the NSMs provide **safe social spaces** where new forms of identity and vocabularies can be experimented with.⁷² For members of both kinds of movement, it is the opportunity to discuss, explore and enact issues of existential significance, and of profound moral import - issues almost impossible to address elsewhere - that is one of the most valuable aspects of membership.

- NRMs have also increasingly been identified as being engaged with the **empowering of individuals**.⁷³ The New Age NRMs in particular can be seen as providing social networks and descriptions of reality which provide their members with a sense of their own power to influence the world.⁷⁴ Similarly, the NSMs have always operated as networks within which individuals can learn new skills and develop new techniques which they can then transfer into other areas of life. The development of alternative technology,⁷⁵ and the professionalisation of environmentalism which many of the NGOs represent, are both examples of this "re-skilling" process.

Arguably, the NGOs have been becoming progressively less able to fulfil the above functions for their individual supporters. By developing as institutions which are increasingly remote from such concerns, they run the danger that their role as "bastions" of the movement might be undercut, as newer, grass-roots organisations emerge which are more able to fulfil these functions.

It is not being suggested here that Greenpeace should turn itself into a religious movement. Its social role is quite different. But this report has argued that this difference is not an absolute one - that, in complex ways, the environmental NGOs and the NRMs are engaged in closely related activities in the production of fresh meanings for contemporary society. Because of this, dialogue and mutual awareness can only be beneficial. In particular, the analysis presented here cautions particular NGOs against becoming too exclusively

identified with those now dominant technocratic and orthodox-political discourses about environmental (and other) issues, to which the NRMs are in part a reaction.

Indeed, it would be an ironic but tragic waste of opportunity if, at the point that NRMs seem to be moving away from hierarchical modes of organisation and dogmatic structures of belief, towards a convergence with the concerns and modes of organisation of the NSMs, the NGOs were to move inexorably in the opposite direction.

Notes

¹ 'New religious movement' as a category includes both sects (factions of other religions that have split away) and cults (innovative or culturally alien religious movements).

² Beckford (1985: 244).

³ Barker (1989: 151).

⁴ Barker (1989: 150). It has to be said that this figure has been contested. Melton (1986: 214) estimates that there are 30,000 witches and pagans in North America, which would suggest a lower figure for Britain.

⁵ Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990: 259).

⁶ Robbins (1988: 1-3). See Stevens (1989) for a very readable account of the role of psychoactive drugs in the cultural change of the 1960s. For the sake of brevity I have presented the counterculture as more unified than is strictly the case - see Tipton (1982: 312-3, n. 33). In particular, for the present purposes I am focussing on the *cultural*, not the more conventionally political, wing - although see my comments below (note 10).

⁷ A number of factors can be seen as contributing to the collapse of the counterculture - the end of the Vietnam War, which had largely fuelled the generation's indignation against technological society; the increased competition for jobs, as the 'baby boom' came of age; and the general inability of the counterculture to find an institutional form which could preserve its values over time (Tipton 1982: 29). But, as I argue here, in some ways the NRMs and NSMs of the 1970s and beyond can themselves be seen as solutions to that last problem, carrying on counterculture ideals in new, more practicable forms.

⁸ Melucci (1989: 6).

⁹ Many feminists would reject the label 'new social movement' as being demeaning to the wide social, cultural, political and intellectual project of feminism. But nevertheless, if the term applies to anything, it clearly applies to at least certain aspects of feminist practice.

¹⁰ The separation of new social movements into 'political' and 'cultural' wings should not be overplayed. Furthermore, in so far as there *is* a separation, it is forced onto the movements by the historical separation of the secular, instrumental world of the public - commerce, government and the voluntary associations of civil society - from the intimate, affective world of the private - the family, religion, and so on.

¹¹ For green communes, see Pepper (1991); for deep ecology, see Devall and Sessions (1985) and Seed et al. (1988); for ecofeminism, see Plant (1989).

¹² This generalisation only holds for the industrialised West. In the rest of the world there has been a huge growth in religious movements in recent years - see Harris et al. (1992). In the United States, there has been a rapid growth of Islam among African Americans. See also note 13 about ISKCON and Sai Baba.

¹³ The numbers are from Barker (1989: 151ff) and Beckford and Levasseur (1986: 30). But note that ISKCON also has tens of thousands of active devotees drawn from the British Asian community (as does the Sai Baba movement) who are usually ignored in studies of the new religious movements.

¹⁴ Wallis (1984: 36-7).

¹⁵ Heelas (1982).

¹⁶ Heelas (1988: 928).

¹⁷ Wallis (1985).

¹⁸ Heelas (1992: 147).

¹⁹ Bainbridge (1985: 163-7).

²⁰ Barker 1989: (165-6, 200-1). See also the famous study of a UFO cult by Festinger et al. (1956).

²¹ Adler (1986); Luhrmann (1989).

²² See Melton (1986: 107-21) or Barker (1989: 188-92) for brief summaries of the movement. Ferguson (1982) is a classic, and Bloom (1991) gathers together a number of key writings.

²³ Bibby and Weaver (1985: 452) argue that NRM members today tend to hold a contingent collection of "a-science fragments", rather than a coherent world-view, and relate this to the

complexity and compartmentalisation of contemporary life. A coherent, unified world-view, they suggest, is irrelevant in an incoherent and fragmented world.

²⁴ Roof and McKinney (1987). For an introduction to the 200-plus retreats, Christian, and non-Christian, in the United Kingdom, Ireland and France, see Whiteaker (1991).

²⁵ Heelas (1992).

²⁶ These features are more characteristic of the 'cultural' end of the new social movements, but even the highly institutionalised NGOs are more implicated in similar social processes than is often recognised.

²⁷ The four characteristics of new social movements used here are taken from Keane and Mier's summary of the work of Alberto Melucci (Keane and Mier 1989: 5-7).

²⁸ Hannigan (1990: 248-9).

²⁹ Hannigan (1990: 249).

³⁰ What section 4 will call "world-rejecting" movements.

³¹ Goffman (1961: 16-22).

³² For recent attempts to describe this convergence of NRMs and NSMs within a unified theoretical framework, see Hannigan (1990; 1991), Beckford (1989: 129-65; 1991; 1992), and Beyer (1992).

³³ Hannigan (1990: 253).

³⁴ Most of the information about T'ai Chi comes from Nigel Sutton (personal communication). For a study of leisure activities as religious activity, see Burfoot (1984).

³⁵ Heelas (1992: 154).

³⁶ McLellan (1990: 26).

³⁷ Westley (1983: 11-3). Heelas (1992: 149-50) calls this the "iron cage thesis".

³⁸ Westley (1983: 13-15). For Heelas (1992: 149-50) this is the "rusting cage thesis".

³⁹ Bryan Turner and Bryan Wilson, cited in Robbins (1988: 54-6); see also Wallis (1984: 72). Lasch (1979) is particularly eloquent about the 'culture of narcissism' he detects in contemporary forms of religiosity.

⁴⁰ As we shall see below, there *are* types of NRM to which each of the theories is more applicable.

⁴¹ Bell (1979). Of course, the growth of the service sector and the 'expressive professions' in particular (see below) make the distinction less strong, but that, in part, is the argument of this section.

⁴² MacIntyre (1985).

⁴³ Yankelovich (1981: 69).

⁴⁴ Baumeister (1986: 261).

⁴⁵ Up to 80%, according to Yankelovich (1981).

⁴⁶ Bellah et al. (1985) emphasise the former, Cancian (1987) the latter.

⁴⁷ Veroff et al. (1981).

⁴⁸ Yankelovich et al. (1983).

⁴⁹ Watts and Wandesforde-Smith (1981).

⁵⁰ Inglehart (1971).

⁵¹ Tipton (1982: 26).

⁵² Inglehart (1971).

⁵³ Gouldner (1979).

⁵⁴ Tipton (1982: 24-6); Martin (1981: 185ff).

⁵⁵ Durkheim (1969). For a study of NRMs from this perspective, see Westley (1978; 1983). For arguments from globalisation see Robertson and Chirico (1985).

⁵⁶ Heelas (1992).

⁵⁷ Beyer (1992) uses a similar argument in an attempt to understand the religious nature of many responses to the environmental crisis.

⁵⁸ Melton (1986: 112-6).

⁵⁹ The present author's typology takes its point of departure from that of Roy Wallis: world-affirming - world-accomodating - world-rejecting (Wallis 1984: 9-39; 1988: 918). Typologies by other researchers have also informed the present work. They include: acceptance - aggressive - avoidance (Yinger 1970: 278); marginal - adaptive (Robbins et al. 1975: 49); audience cults -

client cults - cult movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 209); refuge - revitalisation - release (Beckford 1985: 85-9; 1992: 4); and dualistic - monistic (Warner 1985).

⁶⁰ 'Cult' is here being used in a wide sense, to include sects and more diffuse religious practices.

⁶¹ Heelas (1985: 87).

⁶² In a way not unlike the early Puritans - see Heelas (1992: 157).

⁶³ Hetherington (1991: 12).

⁶⁴ Barker (1983: 47).

⁶⁵ Barker (1983: 42); Wallis (1984: 92); Bibby and Weaver (1985: 451).

⁶⁶ Wallis (1982).

⁶⁷ Hadden (1983: 24) has argued that the separation of church and state has intensified the role of religion in the construction of social problems, because of the independence this has granted on religious organisations from the centres of power.

⁶⁸ Hadden (1983: 25).

⁶⁹ See Beckford and Levasseur (1986: 35) on NRMs, and Eyerman and Jamison (1991) on NSMs.

⁷⁰ Tipton (1982); Aidala (1985).

⁷¹ Barker (1989: 29-30). For some indication of the commonness of contemporary religious experience, see Hardy (1980).

⁷² Melucci (1989); Connell (1990).

⁷³ Hannigan (1991: 324).

⁷⁴ Beckford (1992: 13).

⁷⁵ Eyerman and Jamison (1991: 75-6).

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