

## Oh, Gods!

Religion didn't begin to wither away during the twentieth century,  
as some academic experts had prophesied. Far from it.  
And the new century will probably see religion explode —  
in both intensity and variety.

New religions are springing up everywhere.

Old ones are mutating with Darwinian restlessness.

And the big "problem religion" of the twenty-first century may not be the one you think

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In 1851 the French historian and philosopher Ernest Renan announced to the world that Islam was "the last religious creation of humanity." He was more than a bit premature. At about the time he was writing, the Bahai faith, Christian Science, Mormonism, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and a major Japanese religious movement known as Tenrikyo were all just coming to life. Falun Gong and Pentecostalism—both of which now have millions and millions of members—had yet to emerge. Whoops.

Contemporary theories of social and political behavior tend to be almost willfully blind to the constantly evolving role of religion as a force in global affairs. The assumption is that advances in the rational understanding of the world will inevitably diminish the influence of that last, vexing sphere of irrationality in human culture: religion. Inconveniently, however, the world is today as awash in religious novelty, flux, and dynamism as it has ever been—and religious change is, if anything, likely to intensify in the coming decades. The spectacular emergence of militant Islamist movements during the twentieth century is surely only a first indication of how quickly, and with what profound implications, change can occur.

It's tempting to conceive of the religious world—particularly when there is so much talk of clashing civilizations—as being made up primarily of a few well-delineated and static religious blocs: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and so on. But that's dangerously simplistic. It assumes a stability in the religious landscape that is completely at odds with reality. New religions are born all the time. Old ones transform themselves dramatically. Schism, evolution, death, and rebirth are the norm. And this doesn't apply only to religious groups that one often hears referred to as cults. Today hundreds of widely divergent forms of Christianity are practiced around the world. Islam is usually talked about in monolithic terms (or, at most, in terms of the Shia-Sunni divide), but one almost never hears about the 50 million or so members of the Naqshabandiya order of Sufi Islam, which is strong in Central Asia and India, or about the more than 20 million members of various schismatic Muslim groups around the world. Think, too, about the strange rise and fall of the Taliban. Buddhism, far from being an all-encompassing glow radiating benignly out of the East, is a vast family of religions made up of more than 200 distinct bodies, many of which don't see eye-to-eye at all. Major strands of Hinduism were profoundly reshaped in the nineteenth century, revealing strong Western and Christian influences.

The fact is that religion mutates with Darwinian restlessness. Take a long enough view, and all talk of "established" or "traditional" faith becomes oxymoronic: there's no reason to think that the religious movements of today are any less subject to change than were the religious movements of hundreds or even thousands of years ago. History bears this out. Early Christianity was deemed pathetic by the religious establishment: Pliny the Younger wrote to the Roman Emperor Trajan that he could get nothing out of Christian captives but "depraved, excessive superstition." Islam, initially the faith of a band of little-known desert Arabs, astonished the whole world with its rapid spread. Protestantism started out as a note of protest nailed to a door. In 1871 Ralph Waldo Emerson dismissed Mormonism as nothing more than an "after-clap of Puritanism." Up until the 1940s Pentecostals were often dismissed as "holy rollers," but today the *World Christian Encyclopedia* suggests that by 2050 there may be more than a billion people affiliated with the movement. In the period after World War II so many new religious movements came into being in Japan that local scholars of religion were forced to distinguish between *shin-shukyo* ("new religions") and *shin-shin-shukyo* ("new new religions"); one Western writer referred to the time as "the rush hour of the gods." The implication is clear: what is now dismissed as a fundamentalist sect, a fanatical cult, or a mushy New Age fad could become the next big thing.

Anybody who doubts the degree to which the religious world is evolving should have a look at the second edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, published last year by Oxford University Press in two oversized volumes of more than 800 pages each. The encyclopedia's title is misleading: the work is not devoted exclusively to Christianity. It is, in fact, the only serious reference work in existence that attempts both to survey and to analyze the present religious makeup of the entire

world. It tracks the birth of new movements, records recent growth patterns, and offers scenarios for future growth. It divides major religions into different denominations and classifies each by country of origin and global reach. It records the dates that movements were founded and the names of their founders. It's the place to turn if you want to know how many Bahais there were in 2000 in the Bahamas (1,241), how many Jews in Yemen (1,087), how many Zoroastrians in Iran (1,903,182), how many Mormons in South Africa (10,200), or how many Buddhists in the United States (2,449,570).

The prime mover and longtime editor of the encyclopedia is a soft-spoken Anglican Charismatic named David B. Barrett. A former missionary in Africa, Barrett began working on the encyclopedia in the 1960s. His idea, which explains the work's title, was to create a reliable and richly informative tool for Christian evangelists around the world. Barrett is now affiliated with the Global Evangelization Movement, in Richmond, Virginia, and with Pat Robertson's Regent University, in Virginia Beach, where he is a research professor of "missiometrics"—the science of missions.

I recently asked Barrett what he has learned about religious change in his decades of working on the encyclopedia. "The main thing we've discovered," he said, "is that there is *enormous* religious change going on across the world, all the time. It's massive, it's complex, and it's continual. We have identified nine thousand and nine hundred distinct and separate religions in the world, increasing by two or three new religions every day. What this means is that new religious movements are not just a curiosity, which is what people in the older denominations usually think they are. They are a very serious subject."

### **The Secularization Myth**

Long the subject of ridicule and persecution, derided as cults, alternative religions are finally being taken seriously. The study of new religious movements—NRMs for short—has become a growth industry. NRM scholars come from a variety of backgrounds, but many are sociologists and religious historians. All are sympathetic to the idea that new religious movements should be respected, protected, and studied carefully. They tend to avoid the words "cult" and "sect," because of the polemical connotations; as a result NRM scholars are often caricatured in anti-cult circles as "cult apologists." They examine such matters as how new movements arise; what internal dynamics are at work as the movements evolve; how they spread and grow; how societies react to them; and how and why they move toward the mainstream.

The NRM field is only a few decades old, but already it has made its mark. NRM scholars were pivotal in the de-fanging of the anti-cult movement in the United States, which exercised considerable influence in the 1970s and 1980s and often engaged in the illegal—but frequently tolerated—practice of kidnapping and "deprogramming" members of new religious movements. In the aftermath of Waco, of the Heaven's Gate and Solar Temple suicides, and of the subway poisonings in Tokyo by Aum Shinrikyo, NRM scholars are now regularly consulted by the FBI, Scotland Yard, and other law-enforcement agencies hoping to avoid future tragedies. They are currently battling the major anti-cult legislation—directed explicitly at the "repression of cultic movements which undermine human rights and fundamental freedoms"—that was passed last year in France. (The legislation was implicitly rooted in a blacklist compiled in 1996 by a French parliamentary commission. The blacklist targets 173 movements, including the Center for Gnostic Studies, the Hare Krishnas, some evangelical Protestant groups, practitioners of Transcendental Meditation, Rosicrucians, Scientologists, Wiccans, and the Jehovah's Witnesses.)

NRM scholars have even influenced the Vatican. In 1991, as part of what was then the largest gathering of Catholic cardinals in the history of the Church, an Extraordinary Consistory was held to discuss just two matters: the "threats to life" (that is, contraception, euthanasia, and abortion) and the challenges posed to the Church by "neo-religious, quasi-religious and pseudo-religious groups." NRM scholars were involved as advisers, and the result was a surprisingly liberal report, written by Cardinal Arinze, that referred to "New Religious Movements" rather than to "cults" or "sects" and even suggested that these movements have something to teach the Church. "The dynamism of their missionary drive," the report said of the NRMs, "the evangelistic responsibility assigned to the new 'converts,' their use of the mass media and their setting of the objectives to be attained, should make us ask ourselves questions as to how to make more dynamic the missionary activity of the Church."

That dynamism also speaks to one of the significant facts of our time: the failure of religion to wither away on schedule. This is a state of affairs that the sociologist Rodney Stark addresses in the book *Acts of Faith* (2000). "For nearly three centuries," he writes, "social scientists and assorted Western intellectuals have been promising the end of religion. Each generation has been confident that within another few decades, or possibly a bit longer, humans will 'outgrow' belief in the supernatural. This proposition soon came to be known as the secularization thesis." Stark goes on to cite a series of failed

prophecies about the impending demise of religion, concluding with a statement made by the American sociologist Peter Berger, who in 1968 told *The New York Times* that by "the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture."

Secularization of a sort certainly has occurred in the modern world—but religion seems to keep adapting to new social ecosystems, in a process one might refer to as "supernatural selection." It shows no sign of extinction, and "theodiversity" is, if anything, on the rise. How can this be? Three decades ago the British sociologist Colin Campbell suggested an answer. A way to explore the apparently paradoxical relationship between secularization and religion, Campbell felt, might be to examine closely what happens on the religious fringe, where new movements are born. "Ironically enough," he wrote, "it could be that the very processes of secularization which have been responsible for the 'cutting back' of the established form of religion have actually allowed 'hardier varieties' to flourish."

### A Theodiversity Sampler

The variety of flourishing new religious movements around the world is astonishing and largely unrecognized in the West. The groups that generally grab all the attention—Moonies, Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, Wiccans—amount to a tiny and not particularly significant proportion of what's out there. Here are just a few representatively diverse examples of new movements from around the world:

- *THE AHMADIS*. A messianic Muslim sect based in Pakistan, with perhaps eight million members in seventy countries, the Ahmadi movement was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a Punjabi Muslim who began receiving divine revelations in 1876. "In order to win the pleasure of Allah," he wrote, "I hereby inform you all of the important fact that Almighty God has, at the beginning of this 14th century [in the Islamic calendar], appointed me from Himself for the revival and support of the true faith of Islam." Ahmad claimed to have been brought to earth as "the Imam of the age today who must, under Divine Command, be obeyed by all Muslims." Members of the movement are considered heretics by most Muslims and are persecuted accordingly. They are barred entry to Mecca. In the Ahmadi version of religious history Jesus escaped from the cross and made his way to India, where he died at the age of 120.
- *THE BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY*. A prosperous ascetic meditation movement based in India, with some 500,000 members (mostly women) worldwide, the group was founded by Dada Lekh Raj, a Hindu diamond merchant who in the 1930s experienced a series of powerful visions revealing "the mysterious entity of God and explaining the process of world transformation." Its establishment was originally rooted in a desire to give self-determination and self-esteem to Indian women. Members wear white, abstain from meat and sex, and are committed to social-welfare projects. They believe in an eternal, karmic scheme of time that involves recurring 1,250-year cycles through a Golden Age (perfection), a Silver Age (incipient degeneration), a Copper Age (decadence ascendant), and an Iron Age (rampant violence, greed, and lust—our present state). The group is recognized as a nongovernmental organization by the United Nations, with which it often works.
- *CAO DAI*. A syncretistic religion based in Vietnam, with more than three million members in fifty countries, Cao Dai combines the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, and also builds on elements of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Geniism. The movement was formally established in 1926, six years after a government functionary named Ngo Ming Chieu received a revelation from Duc Cao Dai, the Supreme Being, during a table-moving séance. The movement's institutional structure is based on that of the Catholic Church: its headquarters are called the Holy See, and its members are led by a pope, six cardinals, thirty-six archbishops, seventy-two bishops, and 3,000 priests. Cao Dai is elaborately ritualized and symbolic—a blend of incense, candles, multi-tiered altars, yin and yang, karmic cycles, séances for communication with the spirit world, and prayers to a pantheon of divine beings, including the Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Quan Am, Ly Thai Bach, Quan Thanh De Quan, and Jesus Christ. Its "Three Saints" are Sun Yat-sen; a sixteenth-century Vietnamese poet named Trang Trinh; and Victor Hugo. The movement gained more adherents in its first year of existence than Catholic missionaries had attracted during the Church's previous 300 years in Vietnam.

- *THE RAËLIANS*. A growing new international UFO-oriented movement based in Canada, with perhaps 55,000 members worldwide, primarily in Quebec, French-speaking Europe, and Japan, the group was founded in 1973 by Raël, a French race-car journalist formerly known as Claude Vorilhon. Raël claims that in December of 1973, in the dish of a French volcano called Puy-de-Lassolas, he was taken onto a flying saucer, where he met a four-foot humanoid extraterrestrial with olive-colored skin, almond-shaped eyes, and long dark hair. The extraterrestrial's first words, in fluent French, were "You regret not having brought your camera?" On six successive days Raël had conversations with the extraterrestrial, from whom he learned that the human race was the creation (by means of DNA manipulation) of beings known as the Elohim—a word that was mistranslated in the Bible as "God" and actually means "those who came from the sky." Past prophets such as Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad had been given their revelations and training by the Elohim, who would now like to get to know their creations on equal terms, and demystify "the old concept of God." To that end the Raélians have raised the money to build "the first embassy to welcome people from space." (Originally Raël was told that the embassy should be near Jerusalem, but Israel has been less than cooperative, and a recent revelation has led Raël to investigate Hawaii as a possibility.) Raël has also recently attracted international attention by creating Clonaid, a company devoted to the goal of cloning a human being.
- *SOKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL*. A wealthy form of this-worldly Buddhism, based in Japan and rooted in the teachings of the thirteenth-century Buddhist monk Nichiren, Soka Gakkai has some 18 million members in 115 countries. It was founded in 1930 by Makiguchi Tsunesaburo and Toda Josei and then re-established after World War II, at which point it began to grow dramatically. "*Soka gakkai*" means "value-creating society," and the movement's members believe that true Buddhists should work not to escape earthly experience but, rather, to embrace and transform it into enlightened wisdom. Early members were criticized for their goal of worldwide conversion and their aggressive approach to evangelism, a strategy referred to as *shakubuku*, or "break through and overcome." In recent years the intensity has diminished. The movement is strongly but unofficially linked to New Komeito ("Clean Government Party"), currently the third most powerful group in the Japanese parliament. It is also registered as an NGO with the United Nations, and recently opened a major new liberal-arts university in southern California.
- *THE TORONTO BLESSING*. An unorthodox new evangelistic Christian Charismatic movement, based in Canada, the movement emerged in 1994 within the Toronto Airport branch of the Vineyard Church (itself a remarkably successful NRM founded in 1974), after a service delivered by a Florida-based preacher named Rodney Howard Browne. To date about 300,000 people have visited the movement's main church. Services often induce "a move of the Holy Spirit" that can trigger uncontrollable laughter, apparent drunkenness, barking like a dog, and roaring like a lion. The group finds support for its practices in passages from the Bible's Book of Acts, among them "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" and "Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.'" The Vineyard Church no longer recognizes the Toronto Blessing as an affiliate, but the two groups, like many other new Christian movements, put a markedly similar emphasis on spontaneity, informality, evangelism, and a lack of traditional organizational hierarchy.
- *UMBANDA*. A major syncretistic movement of spirit worship and spirit healing based in Brazil, with perhaps 20 million members in twenty-two countries, Umbanda emerged as an identifiable movement in the 1920s. It fuses traditional African religion (notably Yoruban) with native South American beliefs, elements of Catholicism, and the spiritist ideas of the French philosopher Allan Kardec. In 1857 Kardec published, in *The Spirits' Book*, transcripts of philosophical and scientific conversations he claimed to have had (using mediums from around the world) with members of the spirit world. The movement grew phenomenally in the twentieth century and is sometimes considered the "national religion of Brazil," uniting the country's many races and faiths.

### **Religious Amoebas**

Last April, hoping to learn more about such groups and the people who study them, I attended an academic conference devoted to new religious movements and religious pluralism. The event, held at the London School of Economics, was put

together and hosted by an influential British organization called the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM), in cooperation with an Italian group known as the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR). The conference sessions were dominated by a clubby international crew of NRM scholars who travel around the world presenting papers to one another. The American, English, formerly Soviet, and Japanese contingents seemed particularly strong. People regularly referred to articles that they had published or read in the new journal *Nova Religio*, a major outlet for NRM scholarship. Much of the buzz in the corridors had to do with the French anti-cult legislation, which was soon to be voted on. Everywhere I turned I seemed to bump into avuncular bearded American sociologists. "I'm so damn sick of the cult-anti-cult debate, I could just puke!" one of them told me heatedly over dinner, gesticulating with his fork. I hadn't brought the subject up.

What made the London conference distinctive was its nonacademic participants. At the opening reception I drank orange juice and munched on potato skins with a tall Swedish woman who had introduced herself to me as a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness—a Hare Krishna. I was joined at lunch one day by a nondescript elderly gentleman in a coat and tie who turned out to be a wry Latvian neo-pagan. Among the others I came across were European Bahais, British Moonies, a Jewish convert to the Family (a sort of "Jesus Freak" offshoot formerly known as the Children of God), members of a small messianic community known as the Twelve Tribes, and several representatives from the Church of Scientology, including the director of its European human-rights office. (Scientology is trying hard to gain formal status as a religion in Europe and the former Soviet Union, but many countries—notably France, Germany, and Russia—consider it a cult to be eradicated.)

That sounds like an exotic cast of characters, but actually it wasn't. The NRM members I encountered at the London conference were no more or less eccentric, interesting, or threatening than any of the people I rode with every morning on the London Underground. I found this oddly oppressive; I thought I'd be getting strangeness and mystery, but instead I got an essential human blandness. The people I met were just people.

This was a point made explicitly by the conference's organizer, Eileen Barker, an eminent British sociologist based at the London School of Economics. Barker is a genial and apparently tireless scholar who is often credited with having popularized the academic use of the term "new religious movement." She made a name for herself in 1984, with her influential book-length study *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (the answer was choice), and she now devotes most of her spare time to INFORM, which she founded. The group is dedicated to making available—to concerned relatives, government officials, law-enforcement agencies, the media, representatives of mainstream religions, researchers, and many others—balanced, accurate, and up-to-date information on NRMs from around the world. Speaking at one of the conference sessions, Barker emphatically reminded her audience of "just how very ordinary the people in the cult scene are." When I asked her later about this remark, she elaborated.

"New religious movements aren't always as exotic as they are made out to be," she said. "Or, indeed, as they *themselves* would make themselves out to be. They're interesting in that they're offering something that, they claim, quite often correctly, isn't on sale in the general mainstream religions. So almost by definition there's a sort of curiosity value about them. They're comparatively easy to study—I knew pretty well all of the Moonies in Britain by the time I completed my study of them. They're interesting because you can see a whole lot of social processes going on: conversion, leaving, bureaucratization, leadership squabbles, ways in which authority is used, ways in which people can change, the difference that people born *into* a religion can make."

I asked a lot of the scholars at the conference why they thought it was important to study new religious movements. Perhaps the most succinct answer came from Susan Palmer, a Canadian who in recent years has become an expert on the Raëlians (and whose ancestors were Mormon polygamists who fled U.S. persecution in the nineteenth century). "If you're interested in studying religion," she told me, "NRMs are a great place to start. Their history is really short, they don't have that many members, their leader is usually still alive, and you can see the evolution of their rituals and their doctrines. It's a bit like dissecting amoebas instead of zebras."

The ultimate dream for any ambitious student of NRMs, of course, is to discover and monitor the very early stirrings of a new movement and then to track it as it evolves and spreads around the globe. Everybody acknowledges how unlikely this is. But the idea that it *could* happen is irresistible. One scholar I met in London who admitted to harboring such hopes was Jean-François Mayer, a tall, bearded, boyishly enthusiastic lecturer in religious studies at the University of Fribourg, in Switzerland. For the past twenty years Mayer has been following a small French movement known as the Revelation of Arès. Founded in 1974 by a former Catholic deacon named Michel Potay, and based near Bordeaux, the movement

describes itself as the corrective culmination of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. "It is an NRM," Mayer told me, "that has all of the constitutive elements of a new religion of the book: new scriptures incorporating previously revealed scriptures, new rituals, and a new place of pilgrimage. When I study such a group, I see such obvious similarities with the birth of Christianity and the birth of Islam that for me it's fascinating and exciting. Sometimes I let myself think that I might be witnessing something similar at its initial stage." Even if the movement doesn't take off—which, Mayer readily admits, is likely—it is a perfect example of what many NRM scholars like to study.

What have the NRM scholars learned? The literature is copious and varied, but several ideas recur again and again. In an environment of religious freedom NRMs emerge constantly and are the primary agents of religious change. They tend to respond quickly and directly to the evolving spiritual demands of the times. It is often said that they are "midwives of new sensibilities." They exist at a high level of tension with society, but they nevertheless represent social and spiritual reconfigurations that are already under way—or, to put it differently, they almost never emerge out of thin air. Their views can rapidly shift from being considered deviant to being considered orthodox. The people who join NRMs tend to be young, well educated, and relatively affluent. They also tend to have been born into an established religious order but to profess a lack of religious belief prior to joining. They are drawn to new religious movements primarily for social reasons rather than theological ones—usually because of the participation of friends or family members. And (*pace* the anti-cultists) most of them soon leave of their own free will.

This last phenomenon is profoundly symptomatic. Because the fact is that almost all new religious movements fail.

### **The Religious Marketplace**

The sociologist Rodney Stark is one of the few people who have been willing to develop specific ideas about what makes new religious movements succeed. This is inherently speculative territory (as with stocks, past performance is no guarantee of future returns), but it also has the potential to be one of the most interesting areas of NRM scholarship, in that such ideas can be applied to all religious movements.

Stark, a professor of sociology and comparative religion at the University of Washington, is blunt, amiable, and a classically American maverick. He does scholarship with an often irreverent swagger. Knowing that he had written specifically on how and why religious movements succeed, I called him and asked him to summarize his thoughts on the subject. "The main thing you've got to recognize," he told me, "is that success is really about relationships and *not* about faith. What happens is that people form relationships and only then come to embrace a religion. It doesn't happen the other way around. That's really critical, and it's something that you can only learn by going out and watching people convert to new movements. We would never, ever, have figured that out in the library. You can never find that sort of thing out after the fact—because after the fact people *do* think it's about faith. And they're not lying, by the way. They're just projecting backwards.

"Something else: give people things to do. The folks in the Vineyard are geniuses at that. It's quite an adventure to go off somewhere and set up a new church for them. The Mormons are great at giving people things to do too. You know, they not only tithe money but they also tithe time. They do an enormous amount of social services for one another, all of which builds community bonds. It also gives you this incredible sense of security—I'm going to be okay when I'm in a position of need; there are going to be people to look out for me. That makes a difference. And if you want to build commitment, send your kids out on missions when they're nineteen! Go out and you save the world for two years! Even if you don't get a single convert, it's worth it in terms of the bonds you develop.

"You've also got to have a serious conception of God and the supernatural to succeed. Just having some 'essence of goodness,' like the Tao, isn't going to do it. It just isn't. It doesn't even do it in Asian countries, you know. They hang a whole collection of supernatural beings around these essences. So to succeed you do best by starting with a very active God who's virtuous and makes demands, because people have a tendency to value religions on the basis of cost."

This last idea is at the heart of much of Stark's work. It is a component of the major sociological model for which Stark is perhaps best known: the rational-choice theory of religion, which proposes that in an environment of religious freedom people choose to develop and maintain their religious beliefs in accordance with the laws of a "religious economy." This model of religious history and change, Stark feels, is what should replace the traditional model—which, he has written, is based on the erroneous and fundamentally secular idea of "progress through theological refinement." It's a controversial model (some find the science of economics only dimly enlightening even when applied to financial markets), but it has

become a major force in recent theorizing about religion. Many of the presentations at the London conference used it as a starting point.

The essence of the idea is this: People act rationally in choosing their religion. If they are believers, they make a constant cost-benefit analysis, consciously or unconsciously, about what form of religion to practice. Religious beliefs and practices make up the product that is on sale in the market, and current and potential followers are the consumers. In a free-market religious economy there is a healthy abundance of choice (religious pluralism), which leads naturally to vigorous competition and efficient supply (new and old religious movements). The more competition there is, the higher the level of consumption. This would explain the often remarked paradox that the United States is one of the most religious countries in the world but also one of the strongest enforcers of a separation between Church and State.

The conventional wisdom is that religion is the realm of the irrational (in a good or a bad sense, depending on one's point of view), and as such, it can't be studied in the way that other aspects of human behavior are studied. But Stark argues that all of social science is based on the idea that human behavior is essentially explainable, and it therefore makes no sense to exclude a major and apparently constant behavior like religion-building from what should be studied scientifically. The sources of religious experience may well be mysterious, irrational, and highly personal, but religion itself is not. It is a social rather than a psychological phenomenon, and, absent conditions of active repression, it unfolds according to observable rules of group behavior.

I asked Stark if he could give me an example of what's happening in the contemporary American religious marketplace. "Sure," he said. "I happen to have grown up in Jamestown, North Dakota. When I left, if you had asked me what the religious situation was going to be like a couple of generations later, I would have told you that it would have stayed pretty much the same: the Catholics would be the largest single group, but overall there would be more Protestants than Catholics, with the Methodists and the Presbyterians being the two largest. But that's not what happened at all. Today the Assemblies of God and the Nazarenes are the two biggest religious bodies in Jamestown. These are new religious movements. There were no Mormons in Jamestown when I was a kid, by the way, and now there's a ward hall. There were two families of Jehovah's Witnesses, and now there's a Kingdom Hall. Evangelical Protestants of all kinds have grown a lot. What's happened is that people have changed brands. They've changed suppliers. Writ small, this is what has happened to the country as a whole. There are new religious movements everywhere—and what this tells me is that in a religious free market institutions often go to pot but religion doesn't. Look at the Methodists! They were nothing in 1776, they were everything in 1876, and they were receding in 1976."

Stark has applied his ideas to the study of the history of Christianity. He suggests, in *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), that early Christianity was a rational choice for converts because its emphasis on helping the needy "prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations." People initially became Christians for a number of rational, nontheological reasons, he argues, and not, he told me, because "two thousand people on a Tuesday afternoon went and heard Saint Paul." People converted because Christianity *worked*. The Christian community put an emphasis on caring for its members, for example; that emphasis allowed it to survive onslaughts of disease better than other communities. People also converted, he writes, because, contrary to the standard version of events, Christianity's initial membership was not drawn predominantly from among the poor. Stark argues that in Roman society Christianity's early members, like members of most other new religious movements, were relatively affluent and highly placed, and thus weren't treated as a social problem to be repressed. In this view, although Christians were subjected to their share of anti-cult persecution, they were largely ignored by the Romans as a political threat and therefore were able quietly to build their membership. Early growth, Stark writes, involved the conversion of many more members of the Jewish community than has traditionally been acknowledged; Christianity offered disaffected Jews a sort of higher-tension new religion that nevertheless maintained continuity with some established Jewish orthodoxies. Why else—rationally speaking—would the Christians have held on to the Old Testament, a sacred text that in so many ways is at theological odds with the New Testament?

Stark has no shortage of critics. Bryan Wilson, a venerable scholar of NRMs based at Oxford, told me that the rational-choice theory of religious economics is "really rather ludicrous" and said that "most European sociologists of religion would quarrel with it." Steve Bruce, a sociologist based at the University of Aberdeen, in Scotland, has complained about the creeping prevalence of the theory, which he attributes (clearly with Stark in mind) to "the malign influence of a small clique of U.S. sociologists."

It does seem dangerously easy to approach any subject—love? music?—with a grand rational-choice framework in mind and then suddenly to see everything in terms of a marketplace of "products" subject to the laws of supply and demand. What does such an approach really say about specific situations? And what constitutes "choice" or "supply" anyway? How does being born into a religion, which is what happens to most people, affect the idea of a "free market"? These are questions that will be debated for years. In the meantime, one can safely say that, misguided or not, rational-choice theory is a serious attempt to grapple with the reality of continual and unpredictable religious change.

### Future Shock

What new religious movements will come to light in the twenty-first century? Who knows? Will that raving, disheveled lunatic you ignored on a street corner last week turn out to be an authentic prophet of the next world faith? All sorts of developments are possible. Catholicism might evolve into a distinctly Charismatic movement rooted primarily in China and headed by an African pope. India's *Dalits*, formerly known as Untouchables, might convert en masse to Christianity or Buddhism. Africa might become the home of the Anglican Church and of Freemasonry. Much of the Islamic world might veer off in Sufi directions. A neo-Zoroastrian prophet might appear and spark a worldwide revival. Membership of the Mormon Church might become predominantly Latin American or Asian. Scientology might become the informal state religion of California. The Episcopalians might dwindle into something not unlike the Amish or the Hutterites—a tiny religious body whose members have voluntarily cut themselves off from the misguided world around them and have chosen to live in self-sustaining hamlets where they quaintly persist in wearing their distinctive costumes (ties with ducks on them, boat shoes) and in marrying only within the community. The next major religion might involve the worship of an inscrutable numinous entity that emerges on the Internet and swathes the globe in electronic revelation. None of these possibilities is as unlikely as it may sound.

One of the most remarkable changes already taking place because of new religious movements is the under-reported shift in the center of gravity in the Christian world. There has been a dramatic move from North to South. Christianity is most vital now in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where independent churches, Pentecostalism, and even major Catholic Charismatic movements are expanding rapidly. The story of Christianity in twentieth-century Africa is particularly noteworthy. There were fewer than 10 million Christians in Africa in 1900; by 2000 there were more than 360 million. And something very interesting is happening: ancient Christian practices such as exorcism, spirit healing, and speaking in tongues—all of which are documented in the Book of Acts—are back in force. In classic NRM fashion, some of these Christianity-based movements involve new prophet figures, new sacred texts, new pilgrimage sites, and new forms of worship.

"New movements are not only a part of Christianity but an enormous part of it," I was told by David Barrett, the editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, when I asked him about Christian NRMs. "According to our estimates, the specifically new independent churches in Christianity number about three hundred and ninety-four million, which is getting on for twenty percent of the Christian world. So it starts to look faintly ridiculous, you see, when the 'respectable' Christians start talking patronizingly about these new, 'strange' Christians appearing everywhere. In a very short time the people in those movements will be talking the same way about us."

One of the stock Northern explanations for these new movements has been that they are transitional phases of religious "development" and represent thinly veiled manifestations of still potent primitive superstitions. That's a line of thinking that Philip Jenkins—a professor of history and religious studies at Penn State, and the author of the forthcoming *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*—dismissed to me as nothing more than a "racist, they've-just-come-down-from-the-trees" kind of argument. Recent NRM scholarship suggests a less condescending view: in a lot of places, for a lot of reasons, the new Christianity works. Just as, in Rodney Stark's opinion, early Christianity spread throughout the vestiges of the Roman Empire because it "prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations," these early forms of new Christianity are spreading in much of the post-colonial world in large part because they provide community and foster relationships that help people deal with challenging new social and political realities.

Rosalind I. J. Hackett, who teaches religious studies at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, is a specialist in African religious movements. "African NRMs have been successful," she told me, "because they help people *survive*, in all of the ways that people need to survive—social, spiritual, economic, finding a mate. People forget how critical that is. In Western academic circles it's very fashionable these days to talk about the value of ethnic identity and all that. But that's a luxury for people trying to feed families. To survive today in Africa people have to be *incredibly* mobile in search of work. One of the



very important things that many of these NRMs do is create broad trans-ethnic and trans-national communities, so that when somebody moves from city to city or country to country there's a sort of surrogate family structure in place."

Some of the most successful African Christian NRMs of the twentieth century, such as the Zion Christian Church, based in South Africa, and the Celestial Church of Christ, in Nigeria, are very self-consciously and deliberately African in their forms of worship, but a new wave of African NRMs, Hackett says, now downplays traditional African features and instead promotes modern lifestyles and global evangelism. The International Central Gospel Church, in Ghana, and the Winner's Chapel, in Nigeria, are examples of these churches; their educated, savvy, and charismatic leaders, Mensa Otabil and David Oyedepo, respectively, spend a good deal of time on the international preaching circuit. The emphasis on global evangelism has helped to spur the development of what Hackett has called the "South-South" religious connection. No longer does Christian missionary activity flow primarily from the developed countries of the North to the developing countries of the South. Brazilian Pentecostal movements are evangelizing heavily in Africa. New African movements are setting up shop in Asia. Korean evangelists now outnumber American ones around the world. And so on.

The course of missionary activity is also beginning to flow from South to North. Many new African movements have for some time been establishing themselves in Europe and North America. Some of this can be attributed to immigration, but there's more to the process than that. "Many people just aren't aware of how active African Christian missionaries are in North America," Hackett says. "The Africans hear about secularization and empty churches and they feel sorry for us. So they come and evangelize. The late Archbishop Idahosa [a renowned Nigerian evangelist and the founder of the Church of God Mission, International] once put it to me this way: 'Africa doesn't need God, it needs money. America doesn't need money, it needs God.' That's an oversimplification, but it gets at something important."

David Barrett, too, underscores the significance of the African missionary presence in the United States. "America is honeycombed with African independent churches," he told me. "Immigrants from Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Congo have brought their indigenous churches with them. These are independent denominations that are very vibrant in America. They're tremendous churches, and they're winning all kinds of white members, because it's a very attractive form of Christianity, full of music and movement and color."

Asian and Latin American missionaries of new Christian movements are also moving north. A rapidly growing and controversial Brazilian Pentecostal movement called the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God—founded in 1977 and often referred to by its Portuguese acronym, IURD—has established an aggressive and successful evangelistic presence in both Europe and North America. A revivalist, anti-institutional movement founded in China in the 1920s and referred to as the Local Church has made considerable inroads in the United States. El Shaddai, a lay Catholic Charismatic movement established in the Philippines in 1984 to compete with Pentecostalism, has now set up shop in twenty-five countries. Another Christian group, the Light of the World Church, a Pentecostal movement based in Mexico, has spread widely in the United States in recent years.

The present rate of growth of the new Christian movements and their geographical range suggest that they will become a major social and political force in the coming century. The potential for misunderstanding and stereotyping is enormous—as it was in the twentieth century with a new religious movement that most people initially ignored. It was called fundamentalist Islam.

"We need to take the new Christianity very seriously," Philip Jenkins told me. "It is *not* just Christianity plus drums. If we're not careful, fifty years from now we may find a largely secular North defining itself against a largely Christian South. This will have its implications."

Such as? I asked.

Jenkins paused, and then made a prediction. "I think," he said, "that the big 'problem cult' of the twenty-first century will be Christianity."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Oh, Gods!*

*The following questions are intended to accompany the article 'Oh Gods' from The Atlantic Monthly. Please answer on a separate paper and attach this as your coversheet when you turn it in.*

1. How would you define a 'cult'?
2. How would you define a 'religion'?
3. When considering the differences between a 'cult' and a 'religion', what is the most important factor which distinguished the two?
4. Is believe in a God a necessary precondition for a religion?
5. Toward the bottom of page 2, the author includes the sentence "...the failure of religion to wither away on schedule". When considering the context of the essay, what is meant by this?
6. The author suggests that religions evolve and mutate in an almost Darwinian way. Explain what he means.
7. What social conditions lead to the creation of new religions?
8. What was it about early Christianity or Islam or Buddhism that made those movements survive, when most new religions fail?
9. To what does the 'secularization myth' refer?
10. To what does the 'rational-choice theory of religion' refer? To what extent (if at all) do you find it plausible?
11. The article neglects to mention in detail the impact of the march of history on the culture on the ground which may affect the survivability of faith. Consider, just to name a few examples, the impact of two world wars in Europe, hundreds of years of anti-Semitic pogroms in Eastern Europe, or the irreligiosity in Communist-controlled regions. How might that reality affect the article's conclusions and survivability of faith?
12. International polls have long sought to ascertain where the most religious and least religious parts of the world are. How might the conclusions of the article complicate these efforts?
13. Consider these legal facts: In the 2011 Australian Census, nearly 65000 people listed "Jedi" as their religion, and a decade earlier 21,000 Canadians did so in their census. In 2001, over 390,000 people also did so on the census in England and Wales. In 2015 The Temple of the Jedi Order was granted tax exempt status in Texas by the IRS. That said, in your opinion, how should (if at all) we distinguish between a religion and a fiction?