Each fall, my hometown of Columbus, Ohio, hosts the Universal Life Expo, a huge convention for alternative spiritual and religious practices held at our local Veterans’ Memorial Hall. Since most central Ohioans come from a mainstream Christian or Jewish background, they are usually amazed to discover that right here, a few blocks from the Ohio Statehouse, we have one of the largest gatherings of New Age and alternative spirituality in the country. Featuring over 330 booths and vendors, the Expo describes itself as a “metaphysical extravaganza” offering “herbs, crystals, jewelry, angels, musical instruments, wholesome food, incense, readings, wellness products, clothing, candles, art, healers, publications, spiritual fulfillment, and something for everybody, even your pets.” The various groups and individuals present include both established religious traditions, such as a group of Tibetan monks who create a large sand mandala, and a vast array of newer spiritual arrivals, such as Spiritualists, Scientologists, channelers, Reiki therapists, psychics, crystal healers, and professional ghost-hunters. The interested visitor can consult with a Spiritualist medium, have a tarot card reading, receive a quick “stress test” from the Church of Scientology, have her or his aura photographed, purchase any of the thousands of crystals and other objects on display, and finally relax with a stop by the “Cuddle Party.” In many ways, the Expo is a microcosm of religious diversity and of the complex role of spirituality in the contemporary United States, where hundreds of new spiritual groups exist and compete alongside more established religions in a vibrant but at times chaotic marketplace of religious ideas, practices, goods, and services (figure 1.1).

If most Americans are surprised to discover a massive New Age convention in downtown Columbus, they are typically even more astonished to know that the Midwest is also one of the largest hubs of neopagan activity in the United States, with dozens of Wiccan, Druid,
and other groups. Just a few weeks after the Universal Life Expo is the neopagan holy day of Samhain (corresponding to Halloween and falling on the autumn equinox). Our own local Druid group, called ADF (Ár nDraíocht Féin, or “A Druid Fellowship”), welcomes the public to attend its major holy days and always performs its major rituals in public spaces such as metro parks, where anyone is invited to attend (figure 1.2).

Even closer to home, I can walk just a few blocks from my campus office down to the Krishna House, the local center for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Perhaps the most successful new religious movement to come from India to the United States, ISKCON began in the mid-1960s, and the Columbus Krishna House is one of its oldest centers. The Columbus Krishna House has been visited by such figures as the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, who had a famous exchange with the ISKCON founder Swami Prabhupada here in 1969. To this day, the Krishna House remains a popular center for spiritual instruction, free food, and high-energy, often ecstatic devotional music, attracting a large crowd of both curious college students and first- and second-generation South Asians.
Meanwhile, just two hours to the east lies Prabhupada’s Palace of Gold, a large and opulent shrine dedicated to ISKCON’s founder in a gorgeous setting surrounded by the West Virginia mountains, flocks of live peacocks, an award-winning rose garden, a major temple, and a cow protection sanctuary (figure 1.1).

This remarkable diversity of new religious life is surely not unique to Columbus, Ohio, where I happen to live (although being in the center of the Midwest, Columbus is typically the ideal test market for virtually everything in America, from new fast-food items to new religious ideas). Rather, this is simply one example of the astounding diversity of alternative spiritual life that exists almost everywhere across the United States, often in the least expected and seemingly most “mundane” spaces. Similar pockets of new religious diversity can be found not just in obvious places such as Northern California but in the farmlands of central Pennsylvania, in the mountains of New York and Massachusetts, on the coasts of Florida, in the forests of Washington, and in the deserts of Arizona, Utah, and Texas.

J. Gordon Melton, one of the most important scholars of new religions, has recently counted over 2,500 religious and spiritual groups in the United States alone; and by his
estimate at least half of them are “non-conventional” or alternative spiritual movements. In other words, in addition to hosting every imaginable form of Christianity and Judaism, as well as various forms of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, the United States is home to an incredible array of New Age, neopagan, and new religious movements. These include huge global movements such as Mormonism as well as small and fairly esoteric groups such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn; high-profile groups that attract celebrity spokespersons such as the Church of Scientology and fairly obscure, low-profile groups such as Heaven’s Gate; new forms of Christianity such as the Branch Davidians and various forms of Satanism such as the Temple of Set; movements that emerged in the nineteenth century such as Spiritualism and Theosophy and groups that emerged in the age of cloning technology such as the Raëlians; earth-based forms of spirituality such as neo-paganism and groups based on UFOs from other worlds such as the Aetherius Society; movements based on Eastern religions such as ISKCON and movements rooted in European traditions such as Wicca; and many hundreds of others. Far from marginal or insignificant, New Age, neopagan, and new religious movements are an integral part of the thriving and increasingly eclectic religious landscape of contemporary America.

As we will see in this book, the United States has been from its inception an unusually fertile land for the growth and development of new religions. Indeed, new religions are arguably quintessentially “American” phenomena. If Americans have long prided themselves on the values of free speech, freedom of religious expression, individualism, and an entre-

![Figure 1.3: Prabhupada's Palace of Gold, West Virginia. Photo by the author.](image-url)
preneurial spirit, then new religions are perhaps the boldest expression of those ideals. Yet perhaps for these very reasons they also raise some of the most complicated questions surrounding religious diversity, freedom, and privacy in modern America, particularly in a post-9/11 era of government surveillance and scrutiny of religions that fall outside the “mainstream.”

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, NEOPAGANISM, AND NEW AGE: THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

The book will be organized more or less historically, moving from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, and it will focus on three broad groups of alternative spiritual movements. The first is new religious movements, which we can define as groups that have emerged roughly within the last 150 years and tend to have clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders; they are also usually organized around a charismatic central figure, such as a Joseph Smith, a Madame Blavatsky, an L. Ron Hubbard, or a Jim Jones. Groups in this category include Mormonism, the Theosophical Society, Scientology, Peoples Temple, the Nation of Islam, the Raelians, and hundreds of others.

The second group is New Age spirituality, which is a far more amorphous, diverse, and decentralized network of beliefs and practices that has roots in the nineteenth century but has become particularly influential since the 1960s and ’70s. The broad label “New Age” includes a diverse array of alternative spiritual practices, such as channeling, crystals, astrology, aromatherapy, and various ideas drawn from Eastern religions. But it tends on the whole to be quite “forward looking,” that is, looking toward a coming era of spiritual realization and freedom (most famously articulated in the idea of the dawning “Age of Aquarius”). It also tends to be quite individualistic, focused on the optimum physical, psychological, and spiritual development of the individual practitioner, who is free to pick and choose from a wide array of spiritual options.

Although the New Age is a diffuse and “leaderless” phenomenon, there are many high-profile figures in the movement, including self-help gurus such as Deepak Chopra (well known for his appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show), popular channelers such as JZ Knight (the medium for the spiritual entity named Ramtha), and celebrities such as Shirley MacLaine (who helped popularize New Age ideas widely through her best-selling books and TV miniseries). And although the New Age is a decentralized phenomenon, there are many key centers of New Age spirituality around the United States. One of the most famous is Sedona, Arizona, well known for its unique red-rock formations, which are believed by many to be “vortices” or centers of spiritual energy. Sedona is also home to a vast array of alternative spiritual shops, such as the Center for the New Age—a self-described “metaphysical superstore” that offers every imaginable spiritual service and product, ranging from channeling, psychic readings, and UFO guides to crystals, jewelry, incense, and even a “canned vortex” (figure 1.4).

The third group covered in this book is neopaganism, which is a blanket term that covers a broad array of movements that have emerged since the middle of the twentieth century.
In contrast to the New Age, neopagans tend to be “backward looking,” that is, looking to an older, usually pre-Christian past that has been long forgotten but is now being rediscovered and revived. And in contrast to new religious movements, neopagans tend to be more fluid and flexible in their communal organization, so that an individual might be a member of multiple covens or involved in a Wiccan circle as well as a Druid group, or be a solitary practitioner. In general, however, neopagans tend to emphasize praxis, that is, practical techniques for altering the internal and external world, such as ritual, dance, performance, and magic. Today, there are literally hundreds of neopagan groups in the United States, ranging from well-known groups such as Wicca, to various pagan traditions drawn from a particular region or ethnicity (Celtic, Norse, Slavic, etc.), to gay and lesbian groups such as the Radical Faeries, and countless others.

**WHY STUDY NEW AGE, NEOPAGAN, AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS?**

Up until the late 1970s, New Age and new religious movements were rarely taken very seriously by scholars and students of religion. For the most part, new religions either were studied by psychologists and sociologists interested in so-called “cult” phenomena or were viewed as relatively insignificant offshoots of the “great traditions,” or the world’s major religions.
In the last few decades, however, that attitude has changed dramatically, and today not only scholars but also journalists, legal experts, and even politicians and law enforcement agencies have recognized the importance of understanding new religions. The reason for this shift in attitudes is at least threefold. First, these movements give us valuable insight into the incredible and growing diversity of religious life in the United States. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many sociologists predicted that religion would gradually wane in significance in the increasingly scientific, rational, industrial, and technological modern world; yet at least in the United States it would seem that quite the opposite has happened, and we now see an incredible proliferation of new spiritual groups in our scientific and technological world. The United States is today arguably the most religiously diverse nation on earth, with new movements proliferating on an almost daily basis, so understanding new religions is critical to understanding this amazing spiritual ferment in modern America. They force us to ask, Why are there now so many new religions? And why particularly in the United States?

Second, new religions raise key legal, ethical, and political debates surrounding religion in the contemporary world. As we will see throughout this book, many new religions have become involved in deeply contested legal questions, such as the use of peyote by the Native American Church, the practice of plural marriage by Mormons, the claim to tax-exempt status by the Church of Scientology, and experimentation in human cloning by the Raëlians. Precisely because they are usually small minority groups on the boundary of “mainstream” religion in the United States, new religions highlight the key issues inherent in the First Amendment, the questions of the free exercise of religion, and the problem of just how far that freedom can be pushed before it conflicts with other laws and rights. Although seemingly “marginal” groups, new religious movements have helped in very real ways to define the boundaries of what counts as “religion” in the United States itself.

Finally, new religions raise profound questions surrounding religious freedom and privacy in a new age of terrorism. At least since the 1990s, following the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 and even more clearly after the 2001 terrorist attacks, Americans have faced an intense and complicated debate about religious freedom and the rapidly expanding new forms of surveillance wielded by the federal government. We now know that the FBI has been secretly monitoring mosques and other religious establishments, and we have learned that the National Security Agency has been monitoring vast amounts of telephone, Internet, and other communications by American citizens. Particularly toward the end of this book, we will discuss the difficult question of how to balance a commitment to freedom of religious expression and privacy with the need to protect public safety. Where do we draw the line between reasonable government surveillance and real invasions of privacy? How do we negotiate between the long-held American values of religious freedom and privacy and the new technologies of surveillance wielded by the NSA, the CIA, and the FBI that might potentially keep citizens a bit safer?

In other words, New Age, neopagan, and new religious movements are hardly just interesting curiosities for a few people in the academic study of religion. Rather, they raise huge,
complex, and critical questions that are of importance to any student in any discipline—from political science to law, from sociology to psychology to business—and really to any thinking citizen who cares about maintaining a healthy, diverse, and vibrant democracy.

“CULT” CONTROVERSIES: NEW RELIGIONS AND ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY

One of the first problems to grapple with in the study of new religions is the use of the term cult. Our English word cult is derived from the Latin term cultus, and in its simplest meaning it merely refers to a system of religious belief or to a form of religious veneration. Up until the twentieth century, the word cult did not really have any particularly negative or derogatory connotations. But in the decades following World War II, as the United States saw the rise of a huge number of new religious communities and alternative spiritual groups, the term cult began to be applied in much more specific and usually negative ways to refer to groups that fell outside the dominant American traditions of “Protestant/Catholic/Jew.” By the early 1960s, anticult paranoia combined with growing fears about the alleged phenomenon of “brainwashing” during the Cold War. This was particularly the case after the publication of Robert Jay Lifton’s widely read book on brainwashing in China, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism (1961). Fueled by anticult literature, the fear was now that brainwashing might take place not just in a faraway communist state but within alternative religious groups right here on American soil. And by the 1970s, the fear of new religions had blossomed into a widespread “cult scare” and given rise to a wide array of anticult groups—the Individual Freedom Foundation, Love Our Children, the Citizens Freedom Foundation, the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, Cults Exodus for Christ, the Cult Awareness Network, and many others—dedicated to saving America’s youth from dangerous mind-control groups.

Today, some sociologists do continue to use the word cult in a non-pejorative way, simply as a means of classifying a small religious community that differs in significant ways from large organized religious institutions and denominations. Following other sociologists, the Canadian scholar Lorne Dawson uses a typology of “church/sect/cult” to distinguish between large religious organizations (such as the Roman Catholic Church or Sunni Islam), smaller denominations or “sects” (such as Pentecostals), and still smaller groups or “cults” (such as Scientology or the Unification Church). In contrast to churches and sects, he suggests, “Cults are more concerned with the satisfaction of individual needs and desires. They usually lay claim to some esoteric knowledge that has been lost, repressed or newly discovered, and they offer their believers some more direct kind of ecstatic or transfiguring experience than traditional modes of religious life.” Cults according to this model also tend to have charismatic leaders and are often loosely organized and short-lived, frequently dissolving once the leader has died.

However, most scholars of religion today, and particularly those working in the United States, have abandoned the “cult” label altogether. Since the 1970s, the term has come to
have so many negative and often ridiculous associations—brainwashing, mass suicide, baby killing, and so on—that most scholars now see it as too problematic and misleading to be useful for understanding these movements. Some scholars of new religions, such as Catherine Wessinger, even argue that the use of the term cult can actually be dangerous, insofar as it can be used to justify aggressive and violent responses to these movements. “It is important,” she writes, “that people become aware of the bigotry conveyed by cult. The word cult dehumanizes the religion’s members and their children. It strongly implies that these people are deviants; they are seen as crazy, brainwashed, duped by the leader. When we label people as subhuman, we create a context in which it is considered virtuous to kill them.”

Wessinger cites the example of the Branch Davidians and the tragic disaster at their ranch in Waco, Texas, when heavily armed agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) raided the community in 1993. Because agencies such as the ATF and the FBI regarded the Branch Davidians as a dangerous cult instead of a legitimate religion, and because they relied for information on highly biased anticult activists, they approached the movement in an overly aggressive and insensitive way that led to a violent shoot-out, a fifty-one-day standoff, and finally the fiery deaths of seventy-six men, women, and children inside the ranch.

Instead, most scholars now prefer to use the more neutral term new religious movements. The value of this label is that it highlights the “newness” of these groups while also reminding us to take them seriously as religions, that is, as complex systems of beliefs and practices that are profoundly meaningful to those who adhere to them. In other words, they need to be studied and understood on the same terms as the so-called “great” religions of the world, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. They also force us to recognize that even the so-called great religions have tremendous internal diversity (from Greek and Russian Orthodox to Pentecostal Christianity, from Sunni and Sufi to Alawite Islam) and vast numbers of new offshoots and variations (from the Branch Davidians and Peoples Temple to the Nation of Islam and al-Qaeda). At the same time, however, calling something a religion rather than a cult surely does not mean that we cannot still look at it critically. After all, the fact that we regard the Roman Catholic Church as a religion should not prevent us from looking critically at the history of child sexual abuse and cover-ups within the church. Likewise, the fact that we call the Branch Davidians a religion rather than a cult does not mean that we cannot look critically at the gender and sexual relations within the community, its hostility toward the US government, or its rather violent interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Of course, if we decide to talk about these groups as “new religions” rather than “cults,” that raises the question of what exactly we mean by religion. There are obviously many, many different ways of defining religion, and our definitions have changed quite a bit over time. For example, prior to the early twentieth century, most forms of Native American belief and practice were not labeled “religion” by scholars or government authorities but were instead called “heathenism,” “savagery,” or “primitive superstition.” Yet today Native American traditions are more or less universally accepted by both scholars and government agencies as
“real religions,” as complex and sophisticated as any other mainstream tradition. Similarly, when Mormonism first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century it was widely persecuted as a deviant cult or an aberration of Christianity, yet today Mormonism is recognized as one of the largest Christian denominations in the world and even by some as an independent world religion in its own right. Meanwhile, the Church of Scientology had to fight for decades with the IRS and other government agencies in order to finally be recognized as a tax-exempt nonprofit “religion” in 1993, yet Scientology is still not recognized in other nations such as France and Germany, where it is viewed as a secte (cult) and a for-profit business. In other words, our definitions of religion not only are highly variable but also change significantly over time. And new religious movements lie at the heart of these debates surrounding the “What is religion?” question.

For the sake of this book, I will follow one of the more useful definitions of religion suggested by the American scholar Bruce Lincoln. While acknowledging the historical contingency of any particular definition and the impossibility of coming up with one that is perfect or universally applicable, Lincoln suggests that we can still use a kind of flexible, provisional, working concept of religion. Rather than a singular thing or essence, he argues, religion is perhaps better understood as a form of discourse that makes a claim to a particular kind of authority. Specifically, religious sorts of discourse make a claim to an authority that is believed to “transcend the human, temporary and contingent, and claims for itself a similarly transcendent status.” Thus “discourse becomes religious not simply by virtue of its content, but also from its claims to authority. Astrophysicists, for instance, do not engage in religious speech when they discuss cosmogony, so long as they frame their statements as hypotheses and provisional conclusions based on experimentation, calculation, and human reason. . . . But should they ground their views in Scripture, revelation, or immutable ancestral traditions, in that moment their discourse becomes religious because of its claim to transcendent authority.”7 Lincoln then suggests four different features that we typically see in religious phenomena; in addition to their use of discourse that appeals to a transcendent source of authority, they also usually involve a set of beliefs and doctrines relevant to that transcendent authority; a set of practices, rituals, and modes of worship; and finally an institutional or collective organization dedicated to the regulation of these discourses, beliefs, and practices.

The advantage of Lincoln’s approach is that it leaves open the questions of whether religious claims are “true” or “false,” whether there really is a transcendent object such as God or the Sacred, and whether some groups are “legitimate” or “illegitimate” religions. Thus, if we follow Lincoln’s definition, most of the groups discussed in this book should clearly be approached and taken seriously as religions, even if many of us viewing these groups might personally disagree with them or even find them deeply problematic. Even groups that seem at first to be quite far outside the mainstream or ethically objectionable—such as the Branch Davidians, which involved the stockpiling of illegal weapons and sexual relations with minors—could still be taken seriously as religious attempts to make sense of the universe or find value in human existence. But even if we accept them as religions we can still view
them critically and ask serious questions about the role of power, authority, gender, sexuality, or social dynamics in these movements. For ultimately these are the same kinds of critical questions we should be willing to ask of any “mainstream” religion as well, whether it is an Evangelical Christian church, a Hindu community, or a Jewish synagogue.

However, some of the movements discussed in this book—above all, the loose and eclectic category of “New Age”—generally lack the institutional and collective structure that we find in other new religious movements. New Age beliefs and practices tend to be highly individualistic and rarely organized into neatly bounded groups or communities. For this reason, many would call New Age a form of “spirituality” rather than religion—that is, a more individualistic, noninstitutionalized approach to the divine that tends to shy away from organized religious structures (a “religion of no religion,” as one scholar, Jeffrey Kripal, put it). According to many recent surveys of religious affiliation, the “spiritual but not religious” category is one of the fastest-growing trends in American culture, so the New Age attitude of spiritual individualism and eclecticism may well be an increasingly visible one in the decades to come.9

HOW “NEW” IS THE NEW AGE? THE ADAPTATION OF ESOTERICISM TO THE MODERN WORLD

One of the first questions we need to ask when studying New Age, neopagan, and new religious movements is: Are these groups really “new” at all? Or is this simply a matter of repackaging and dressing up fairly old religious ideas in new outfits with newer and fancier language?

The answer, of course, is both yes and no. While all of the movements discussed in this book are “new” in the sense that they have emerged roughly within the last 150 years, they are also rooted in much older traditions of alternative spirituality. As some scholars have argued, the New Age is in many ways only a modern reinterpretation or reworking of a long current of alternative religious ideas, often referred to as Western esotericism.10 Derived from the Greek term esoteros, meaning “inner” or “hidden,” esotericism refers to a large body of traditions that date back to the Hellenistic world of the first centuries of the Common Era (CE or AD). These include early forms of Christianity such as Gnosticism that were later branded as heretical by the mainstream church, forms of Jewish mysticism such as Kabballah, and ancient Greek and Mediterranean traditions such as Hermeticism. A wide array of practices and movements are included under the label of “Western esotericism,” including astrology, alchemy, and various forms of magic, as well as secret societies such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism. Despite their diversity, however, most of these esoteric traditions share at least four features and themes:

1. The idea of correspondences. The entire universe, from the planets and stars in the heavens down to plants, animals, and stones on the earth and every aspect of the human body, is believed to be connected through a complex network of hidden
correspondences or analogies, like a cosmic hall of mirrors. This idea is most famously summarized in the saying “As above, so below” from the early religious and philosophical tradition known as Hermeticism. The correct understanding of these connections is the basis of all forms of magic, astrology, and spiritual healing. This is the underlying logic, for example, of the astrology column in every newspaper still printed today and widely read even by most Americans who know or care nothing about other forms of Western esotericism.

2. The idea of living nature. Not only is the entire universe believed to be connected by a network of hidden correspondences, but it is also believed to be a living organism, animated by its own living energy or soul. The correct understanding of this living energy is the key not only to magical practice but also to various forms of spiritual healing. The concept of living nature is similar in many ways to Asian concepts such as the Chinese ch'i (as in the practice of Tai chi), and the Indian prana, which is both breath and a kind of vital energy that flows through not just the body but all of nature. In contemporary literature, the idea of living nature has been partially revived in the Gaia hypothesis, or the view of the earth as a complex self-regulating living system that maintains the conditions for life. And in popular culture, the idea of living nature has found perhaps its most famous form in the Star Wars films as “the Force,” the vital energy that binds all things and can be harmonized with and/or manipulated by the trained Jedi master.

3. Multiple, vividly imagined intermediary entities between the human and the divine. Most Western esoteric traditions include a complex hierarchical view of the universe with a great chain of intermediary entities between the human and the divine, often visualized in highly imaginative forms (as angels, demons, demigods, and other supernatural beings). Through contemplation and spiritual practice, the individual can ascend and descend the complex visionary ladder between this world and the divine. Perhaps the most famous example of this idea is the “tree of life” or tree of the sephiroth described in the Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah. Imagined as a series of ten radiant emanations, the sephiroth stretch from the infinite abyss of the Godhead down to the divine presence in the physical world. At the same time, the tree of the sephiroth represents a visionary ladder that the individual Kabbalist can ascend through contemplation.

4. The experience of transmutation. Western esoteric traditions are typically not just a matter of intellectual speculation; they also involve practical techniques for transforming the physical world and the human self. This transmutation may involve the manipulation of the material world through magic or the transformation of the individual subject into a divine or enlightened state. In the tradition of alchemy, for example, the transmutation of metals (such as lead
into gold) can serve as a metaphor for the spiritual transmutation of the individual from a lower to a higher spiritual state.

All of these themes in the Western esoteric tradition can be found in one form or another in the various New Age, neopagan, and new religious movements covered in this book. The entire tradition of neopaganism and modern magic that has flourished since the mid-twentieth century, for example, is based largely on the concepts of living nature and correspondences. Many new religious movements, such as Mormonism, Theosophy, Spiritualism, and the Raelians, include complex hierarchies of mediations between the divine and human realms, with a variety of supernatural beings such as angels, masters, extraterrestrials, and spirits. And most of the diverse phenomena we call “New Age” are centered primarily on the concept of physical and spiritual transmutation—either healing the mind and body through various techniques, such as energy alignment, aromatherapy, and crystal healing, or transforming the spirit through techniques such as meditation, mediumship, and channeling.

So if we can say that New Age and religious movements have many deep roots in a much longer history of alternative and esoteric spirituality in Western culture, then what if anything is “new” about them? In many cases, what distinguishes new religious movements is less the content of their beliefs and practices than the ways in which they express or “package” them and uniquely adapt them to the modern world. They have, in a sense, been refracted through the lens of modern thought, colored by aspects of modern science, technology, popular culture, and in some cases consumer capitalism.

A good example is the Church of Scientology, which has a great deal in common with older esoteric traditions such as Gnosticism and which draws many elements from Hinduism and Buddhism. Yet from its origins in the early 1950s, Scientology’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard, made extensive use of the language of modern science and even developed his own new piece of spiritual technology called the E-meter or Electropsychometer. A science fiction writer himself, Hubbard also incorporated elements from popular culture such as the widespread interest in UFOs, space travel, life on other worlds, and superpowers.

Another good example is the practice of trance channeling, which again has roots that run deep in the history of Western esotericism and alternative spirituality. While communicating very old religious ideas, famous trance channels such as Jane Roberts make frequent use of the language of modern technology, such as radio and television, to describe the way in which they pick up the signal or “channel” of a particular spirit. The contemporary channel JZ Knight makes extensive comparisons to modern science, particularly quantum physics, to explain her spiritual philosophy and the message of her channeled entity named Ramtha. Knight also appeared in a 2004 film What the Bleep Do We Know? which was created by followers of the Ramtha movement and which made extensive comparisons between quantum physics and New Age spirituality.

In sum, the “newness” of New Age and new religious movements often lies less in the message than in the medium through which that message is communicated.
WHY NOW? WHY HERE? REASONS FOR THE RISE OF NEW RELIGIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

If it is true that the United States today has such a tremendous diversity of new religious movements, we have to ask the basic questions: Why here and why now? Why does contemporary America seem to be the land par excellence for the growth and spread of alternative spiritual traditions?

Surely part of the answer lies in this country’s unique religious and legal history. Since the arrival of the Puritans, Quakers, and Shakers, the “New World” has long been seen as a refuge for alternative and persecuted religious minorities (even though many of these groups, such as the Puritans, would not turn out to be particularly tolerant of religious difference themselves). Still more importantly, religious diversity in America has a unique history in large part because of the establishment clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution (that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”). Although this clause has a long and extremely complicated history of legal interpretations, it has meant that American courts and federal agencies have had a fairly “hands off” attitude toward religious groups, at least compared to other modern nations. Indeed, US agencies and courts have generally been reluctant to even define the terms religion or religious organization, since any fixed definitions would inevitably exclude the beliefs and practices of some faith communities. As the Supreme Court acknowledged as early as 1878 in its discussion of Mormonism, “The word ‘religion’ is not defined in the Constitution. We must go elsewhere, therefore, to ascertain its meaning.” The United States does not register religious groups and has no official hierarchy of religious organizations. This lack of an established state religion and this reluctance by the courts to even define religion has opened the way for tremendous religious experimentation and a kind of “free market” of spiritual innovation and competition. As the historian R. Laurence Moore notes, the growth of a diverse marketplace of religious options was already well under way in the eighteenth century; but the establishment clause of the First Amendment intensified this market rationale and helped foster an environment of competition among denominations, which all had to “make religion popular” amid the many other goods and services of the world. As a result, the United States has become in many ways incredibly fertile soil for the planting and flourishing of a tremendous variety of religious groups over the last two centuries.

In many ways, the rise of New Age and new religious movements can be seen less as a radical shift in American history than as the continuation of a long series of spiritual revivals in the United States dating back to the eighteenth century. The United States has witnessed several periodic upsurges in religious fervor and the proliferation of new forms of worship and ways of relating to the divine. Usually historians describe a First Great Awakening that spread across the American colonies in the 1730s and 40s, followed by a Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century. This second resurgence of spiritual life in the 1830s and 40s helped give rise to several of the movements covered in this

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book, including Mormonism and Spiritualism, which both grew out of the wave of religious revival that began in the northeastern United States.

Some historians also add a Third Great Awakening, which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth and helped give birth to new movements such as Christian Science and the Holiness and Pentecostal movements. Still others add a Fourth Great Awakening, which began in the 1960s. In many ways, the period of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the most rapid growth of New Age spirituality and new religious movements. Fuelled by the civil rights movement, new forms of feminism, the sexual revolution, experimentation with psychedelic drugs, and anti-Vietnam War protests, these decades gave birth to a wide array of alternative forms of spirituality. At the same time, the new immigration rules signed into law by the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965 opened the door for a new wave of people from South and East Asia to enter the United States, which helped give birth to movements such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (aka Hare Krishna) and various new forms of Buddhism. In this sense, the explosion of new religions has been closely tied to the processes of globalization, as people, ideas, and capital have been able to flow ever more rapidly across the planet, interacting with one another in new and creative ways.

Finally, one might well argue that the turn of the millennium and the 9/11 terrorist attacks have ushered in yet another Great Awakening—though perhaps one with darker and more disturbing implications than previous periods of religious resurgence. The years leading up to 2000 clearly witnessed a powerful wave of millenarian and apocalyptic new religious movements, such as the Branch Davidians (who had a tragic showdown with federal agencies in 1993), Heaven's Gate (whose members committed collective suicide in 1997), and Aum Shinrikyo (whose members unleashed sarin gas in Tokyo subways in 1995). Above all, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, these kinds of new religious movements raise profound and complex questions of religious freedom, privacy, and government surveillance—particularly surrounding the role of government agencies and law enforcement in monitoring religious groups that could be dangerous and/or self-destructive and the extent to which we are willing to allow government surveillance to intrude on basic rights to privacy and religious freedom.

As we will see in the chapters of this book, many new religious movements were also key test cases for the First Amendment, challenging the courts and the American public to think seriously about how far the limits of religious freedom go. Does the nonestablishment of religion mean that Mormon men can marry more than one wife, for example? Does it mean that Native Americans can consume peyote, which is classified as a Schedule I controlled substance? Or that Rastas can smoke marijuana? In other words, not only do new religions represent some of the most remarkable expressions of the rich diversity of religious options fostered by the First Amendment, but they also have presented some of the most intense flash points for debating its meaning and applicability to specific groups of believers.
To help us dive into the complex issues involved in studying New Age and new religious movements, let’s just briefly examine one particular example and then think about various approaches for studying, interpreting, and making sense of it. While there are many possible examples we could focus on here, I would suggest we look at the complex case of the Heaven’s Gate movement, thirty-nine of whose members committed mass suicide in 1997. With its rich mixture of Christian apocalyptic ideas, UFO beliefs, and other elements drawn from science fiction and popular culture, Heaven’s Gate is not only a striking illustration of many New Age and new religious ideas but also a powerful example of the difficulties we face in trying to study and make sense of these movements.

Heaven’s Gate was founded by Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931–97; figure 1.5), who was born the son of a Presbyterian preacher in Spur, Texas. As a young man, Applewhite studied music, briefly served in the military, and then taught music at the University of Alabama and at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. Throughout these years, he also appears to have struggled with his own sexuality, and he was fired from the University of Alabama for having sexual relations with a male student. Eventually Applewhite would have himself hospitalized to try to “cure” his homosexuality, and he later had himself castrated in an attempt to resolve his sexual desires once and for all.

In 1972, Applewhite met Bonnie Lu Nettles (1927–85), a nurse who was very interested in Spiritualist and New Age phenomena such as séances, mediums, fortune-telling, and astrology. Together, Applewhite and Nettles concluded that they had been chosen to fulfill biblical prophecy, eventually calling themselves “the two,” referring to the two “witnesses” mentioned in the book of Revelation. Gathering a small group of followers, they began teaching a complex mixture of religious ideas drawn from Christianity (particularly Revelation), UFO beliefs, and elements of popular culture such as Star Trek. Heaven’s Gate was not, however, the first new religion to incorporate ideas about UFOs into its belief system. Since the late 1940s, there had been widespread speculations about UFO sightings, which also gave birth to many UFO-based religions throughout the United States and Europe (see chapter 14 below).

The basic belief articulated by Applewhite was that two thousand years ago Jesus Christ had come to this world via spacecraft as a “captain” with his “away team” and had delivered his original message. However, that message was misunderstood and corrupted by mainstream Christian churches. Now, however, Applewhite and Nettles were bearing the final message that Jesus would soon be returning, again by spacecraft, and that their followers would have a last chance to exit this world before its final
destruction and renewal. The higher realm from which Jesus had come and to which he would return was called variously the Kingdom of Heaven, the Next Level, or “the Evolutionary Level Above Human” (T.E.L.A.H.), while this world was regarded as a temporary “garden” that would soon be “recycled.” According to materials first published in book form and later posted on the Heaven’s Gate website:

Two thousand years ago, the Kingdom Level Above Human appointed an Older Member to send a Representative (His “Son”), along with some of their beginning students, to incarnate on this garden. . . . While on Earth as an “away team” with their “Captain,” they were to work on their overcoming of humanness and tell the civilization they were visiting how the true Kingdom of God can be entered. . . .

Again an “away team” from the Level Above Human incarnated in the 1970s in the mature (adult bodies) that had been picked and prepped for this current mission.1

Nettles died of cancer in 1985, and the group kept a low profile for the next several years. In the 1990s, however, they reemerged with the new name Heaven’s Gate and made their home in a large mansion in the San Diego area. During this time they also made their living through a business called Higher Source, which designed websites for various clients in the early days of the World Wide Web.

Members of Heaven’s Gate led a highly ascetic and regulated life, similar in many ways to the discipline of a Christian or Buddhist monastic community. Each member was assigned a “check partner” to help monitor her or his behavior throughout the (continued)
day, and each followed an elaborate list of rules for dress, diet, and comportment, along with a long list of major and minor offenses. Examples of such offenses included: “Taking any action without using my check partner; Trusting my own judgment—or using my own mind; . . . Criticizing or finding faults with my classmates or teachers; . . . Staying in my own head, having private thoughts . . . ; Having likes or dislikes.”

Sexuality was considered to be especially in need of regulation, and seven other male members of the group would follow Applewhite’s lead and have themselves castrated in order to deal with this particular human desire.

The aim of this elaborate regulation of behavior, Applewhite explained, was to overcome and transcend the physical human condition altogether and so prepare members to receive a new, perfect, genderless body that would be part of the Kingdom of Heaven or the “Next Level Above Human.” According to Applewhite’s instructions, “The student must complete this change to the point of abhorring human behavior before his soul can be a ‘match’ with a biological body of the true Kingdom of God—for that new, genderless body is designed to function at a much more refined level.”

An image from the Heaven’s Gate website depicted how a member of the Next Level might appear: it is a classic popular image of an alien, complete with a large smooth head, black eyes, and a silver space suit.

Demographically, the members of the Heaven’s Gate group do not appear to fall into any obvious categories and do not seem to fit the common stereotype of dysfunctional individuals or alienated social misfits. The members were men and women who ranged in age from twenty-six to seventy-three and came from an extremely diverse range of backgrounds. They included a former army paratrooper, a rock musician, a massage therapist, a computer trainer, an oysterman, a farm girl, a nurse, a bus driver, an artist, and a car salesman. Indeed, the occupational, sexual, and racial profile of these individuals does not appear that much different from a sample cross section of the American population as a whole. Moreover, there is no evidence that members were psychologically disturbed, unintelligent, or previously inclined to self-identify as outsiders.

One of the most interesting things about Heaven’s Gate is that this was, in many ways, the world’s first “cyber-religion.” Not only did the members make their living as website designers, but they also used the Internet to advertise their message of the imminent return of Jesus and successfully recruited several new members in this way. Still more significantly, they incorporated the language of computers, cyberspace, and virtual reality into their theology. Thus the articles on the Heaven’s Gate website used the language of hard drives and software to describe the relationship between the soul, the brain, and the divine realm: “The soul has its own ‘brain’ or ‘hard drive’ that accumulates only information of the Next Level.” Members also used technologi-
cal language drawn from popular science fiction shows such as Star Trek: The Next Generation, describing this world, for example, as a “holodeck” where we practice for the “real world,” which is the Kingdom of Heaven. As one member put it, “We watch a lot of Star Trek, a lot of Star Wars, it’s just, to us, like going on a holodeck. We’ve been training on a holodeck. . . . Now it’s time to stop. . . . We take off the virtual reality helmet, . . . go back out of the holodeck to reality to be with . . . the other members on the craft in the heavens.”

On March 19–20, 1997, the Hale-Bopp comet passed within visible range of Earth, and many UFO watchers believed that there was some kind of object—possibly a spacecraft—riding in its tail. Applewhite announced to the group that this was the “marker they had been waiting for” and the sign that a spacecraft was returning to take them back to the Kingdom of Heaven or the Next Level Above Human. To board the craft and ascend to the Next Level, however, they would need to leave behind their physical bodies. In preparation for their departure, Applewhite and members videotaped a farewell message in which they explained their actions—claiming that they were acting completely of their own free will and that this would not be suicide but a journey to a new world. In the video, members are shown dressed in identical black suits with an arm patch identifying them as the “Away Team.” On March 24, 25, and 26, thirty-nine members then committed suicide in three groups by consuming phenobarbital mixed with applesauce and washed down with vodka; all but three also had plastic bags over their heads to induce asphyxiation. All of the bodies were found dressed in their identical black Away Team outfits, each wearing black and white Nike sneakers and carrying a five-dollar bill and three quarters (said to be needed for interplanetary tolls).

The Heaven’s Gate suicides leave us with a number of extremely difficult methodological and theoretical questions, which are directly relevant to the broader study of new religious movements. How should we go about trying to study this movement, and what methodological approaches would be most useful for trying to make sense of such a complex religious phenomenon? Should we attempt to reconstruct a psychological profile of its founder and members? Should we gather relevant sociological data on the group, examining its demographics and social profile? Should we focus on a textual analysis of the written and digital materials they left behind? Should we try to place the movement in the broader historical and cultural context of America during the 1980s and ‘90s? Or do we need a mixture of all of the above? And how should we make sense of this movement and its suicides from a theoretical perspective? Is it best understood through the lenses of psychology, or sociology, or sexuality studies, or cultural studies, or comparative religions—or again, through a complex mixture of all of these approaches?
Scholars themselves, we should note, do not agree on how to make sense of Hea-
ven’s Gate. An entire book was published on the subject, featuring chapters from a wide
array of scholars, many of whom argue with one another about the most useful inter-
pretation of this controversial movement. Some argue that Heaven’s Gate was not so
much a weird “aberration” as a “quintessentially American” religious movement, which
creatively synthesized elements of Christian theology, New Age spirituality, elements
of popular culture, and other ideas circulating in the American spiritual marketplace.7
Others, however, describe Heaven’s Gate as a kind of “deviant group” creating an atmos-
phere of “total obedience” that served to cut its members off from the world and ulti-
mately led to self-destructive behavior.8 And still others argue that we need to approach
the movement sociologically, examining the larger cultural, spiritual, and social milieu
that leads individuals to join alternative communities like this in the first place.9

So readers should be encouraged to disagree, argue, and come up with their own
interpretations—not only of Heaven’s Gate but of all of the movements discussed in
this book. All of these groups should be examined and discussed from multiple perspec-
tives, with different methodologies and different theoretical perspectives, and readers
should be encouraged to debate their advantages and disadvantages for the larger
project of thinking about religion in contemporary America.

1. See the article “Last Chance to Advance beyond Human,” which appeared on the origi-
nal Heaven’s Gate website in 1994 and has been mirrored at www.wave.net/upg/gate/
/lastchnc.htm. These materials were published as a book entitled How and When “Hea-
ven’s Gate” (The Door to the Physical Kingdom Level Above Human) May Be Entered
(Telah Foundation, 1997).
2. Ibid., sec. 2, p. 9.
3. Ibid.
4. See Hugh B. Urban, “The Devil at Heaven’s Gate: Rethinking the Study of Religion in
the Age of Cyberspace,” Nova Religio 3, no. 2 (2000): 268–302; see also George Chryss-
sides, introduction to Heaven’s Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide
5. “‘95 Statement by an E.T. Presently Incarnate,” which appeared on the original Heaven’s
Gate website in 1994 and has been mirrored at www.wave.net/upg/gate/g95upd96.htm.
6. Jeffrey Sconce, “Star Trek, Heaven’s Gate and Textual Transcendence,” in Cult Television,
7. Benjamin Ethan Zeller, “Scaling Heaven’s Gate: Individualism and Salvation in a New
Religious Movement,” in Chryssides, Heaven’s Gate, 155, 181. See also Zeller, Heaven’s
8. Winston Davis, “Heaven’s Gate: A Study of Religious Obedience,” in Chryssides, Hea-
ven’s Gate, 100–102.
Joining a UFO Cult,” in Chryssides, Heaven’s Gate, 37–52.
HOW TO STUDY NEW AGE AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: BALANCING RESPECT AND CRITICAL THINKING

The study of new religious movements is in many ways a particularly acute example of the challenges we face in trying to make sense of all religious traditions. Trying to understand any religion—particularly one very different from one’s own—involves a complex negotiation between sympathetic understanding and critical distance, between “closeness” and “otherness.” But because new religious movements are at once minority communities and also often flashpoints for larger cultural debates (polygamy, feminism, cloning, use of controlled substances, etc.), they are often particularly difficult cases to analyze and interpret in a sensitive, nuanced way, without dismissing or sensationalizing them.

In this book, I will suggest that we adopt an approach that strives to maintain a careful balance between an attitude of respect and an attitude of critical thinking. By this I mean that we should first try to take all of these groups seriously on their own terms as legitimate examples of the human desire to find deeper meaning and value in the universe. Here I suggest that we begin by exercising our sympathetic imagination to try as far as possible to see the world from the believer’s perspective from the very outset. At the same time, however, this does not mean that we cannot also ask difficult critical questions about these groups, such as: What are the implications of this movement for gender relations or the dynamics of power and authority? How are these groups related to broader historical trends or the social, political, and economic contexts of the United States over the last 150 years? In other words, we need to balance our respectful understanding of the beliefs and practices of these groups with a critical and complex analysis of their role in American history and culture as a whole.

Because of the tremendous diversity of new religions in the United States, there is no single “method” for approaching and interpreting them. Some groups might lend themselves particularly well to an ethnographic approach, based on detailed interviews and long-term study of a particular community (for example, an ethnographic study of neopagan festival culture in the United States); but other groups such as Mormonism, which began over a century ago, might lend themselves more to a historical study of their roots in American society and in larger cultural changes over the last 150 years. Still others, such as Spiritualism or Wicca, which offered new forms of authority and leadership to women, might lend themselves to a study of gender and sexuality.

In the chapters that follow, these sorts of theoretical and methodological questions are left largely implicit so that readers can draw their own conclusions through an engagement with the religious movements themselves. However, for those who wish to discuss these theoretical questions more directly, there is also an appendix at the end of the book entitled “Method and Theory in the Study of New Religions.” This suggests a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, ranging from sociology and psychology to feminism and cultural studies. The study of new religions, I will suggest, demands that we assemble a complex and varied “toolbox” of methodologies, as it were. As we examine a wide array of
traditions, from the Native American Church and Mormonism to Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidians, I will suggest that we try to examine them from multiple perspectives, through many different theoretical lenses. No one approach can make sense of every religious movement, any more than a hammer can be used to turn screws or a saw used to patch holes. So stocking a good methodological toolbox means that we should be familiar with a variety of methods drawn from psychology, sociology, anthropology, critical legal studies, gender and sexuality studies, media studies, and others. To understand the role of women in contemporary neopaganism, for example, we might want to draw upon contemporary feminist theory; to understand the role of plural marriage in Mormonism, we might want to use a more historical approach, examining the changing role of marriage and family in nineteenth-century America; or to understand the debates surrounding marijuana use by Rastas, we might need to draw upon critical legal studies. By the end of this book, after we have looked at an array of new religions and key issues, we should have a diverse set of theoretical tools that we can use to study not just alternative spiritual groups but really any religions.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK: KEY ISSUES AND DEBATES IN THE STUDY OF NEW RELIGIONS

The remainder of this book consists of thirteen chapters, each of them covering one specific movement, and progresses more or less chronologically from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Each chapter also highlights one key issue or controversy related to that movement as a way to spark discussion and debate. For example, the chapter on the Native American Church will highlight the debate surrounding the use of peyote and the complex legal battles that ensued in the late twentieth century as a way of raising larger questions of religious freedom and the law. The chapter on Spiritualism will highlight the new role of women as mediums and spiritual leaders, which raises complex questions about female power, authority, and status in nineteenth-century America. The chapter on the Branch Davidians will highlight the relation of new religions to law enforcement, raising the difficult question of how we should deal with groups that may be engaging in illegal and potentially violent activities.

From the outset, we should emphasize that we should not and cannot reduce these movements simply to a single issue or controversy. There is obviously far more to Mormonism than plural marriage, which is no longer even practiced by the vast majority of Mormons. And of course, not all neopagans are feminists or environmentalists. Instead, these key issues should be regarded simply as focal points for thinking more critically about new forms of spirituality and about religion in general. They help us ask key questions, such as: What are the broader legal, social, and political implications of these movements? What role have they played, not just in American religious life, but in American history and culture more broadly? How have they helped shape the boundaries and contours of what we call religions in America (rather than “cults” or “philosophies” or “businesses”)? And how, in some more extreme cases, do we deal with groups that engage in illegal or dangerous behavior while still
respecting the First Amendment and basic rights to privacy and freedom of religious expression?

In sum, rather than reducing these groups to a particular issue or controversy, the chapters in this book should be used as a means both to explore the larger history of each of these movements and to raise much larger questions about religion in the contemporary United States.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

1. This chapter suggests using Bruce Lincoln’s definition of religion as a useful starting point for the study of New Age, neopagan, and new religious movements. But do you find his definition persuasive and adequate? Does it leave anything out? What other definitions could we come up with? And what are the advantages and limitations of each?

2. If we accept the definition of religion outlined in this chapter, does Heaven’s Gate meet it? After all, most religions do not typically end in mass suicide. So should we call movements such as Heaven’s Gate something else, other than religion? Or does Heaven’s Gate tell us something interesting about “religion” itself?

3. This introduction suggests a number of possible reasons for the rapid growth of new religious movements in the United States: (a) the ideal of religious freedom and the interpretation of the First Amendment in US history; (b) the periodic waves of religious “awakenings” in US history from the First and Second Great Awakenings to the 1960s spiritual counterculture; (c) globalization, cultural contact, and rapid social change; (d) the United States as a growing spiritual marketplace with a spirit of experimentation and competition. Which, if any, of these explanations seems most plausible to you? Are there other ways of explaining the rapid growth of new religions in the contemporary United States?

4. Does the United States seem to be unique in this regard—that is, does it seem to be more of a religious hotbed than other nations, or is there simply a global trend toward religious experimentation and proliferation?

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

View the Heaven’s Gate farewell video (which is widely available online, on YouTube and elsewhere, and is reproduced in many programs, such as the ABC News Nightline special “Inside Heaven’s Gate”). Discuss, first of all, why such a video would have been made at all, since the members were leaving Earth before it was supposed to be destroyed and “recycled.”
What personal, psychological, communal, or spiritual purposes might such a video have served for the group or for their loved ones? Second, how would you begin to analyze these farewell statements themselves? Were they simply “virtual suicide notes,” or did they play some larger religious role in this group’s complex theology and belief system?

**SUGGESTED FILM**


**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**


**NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION**

1. Program for “One Light: The 22nd Annual Universal Light Expo,” October 9–10, 2010, Columbus, OH. The event’s name was changed to “Universal Life Expo” in 2013.