

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LORNE L. DAWSON (ed.), *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 297 p.

Readers can be problematic to review. The good ones re-introduce you to old friends and to some new ones. The bad ones make you want to dump the volume into the nearest recycling bin. Fortunately, *Cults and New Religious Movements* fits into the former category. Cults (or New Religious Movements) have a fascination both for the general public and scholars of religion and religious movements. There is a long history of research in this area from a variety of disciplines. Even in sociology when secularization theory held sway and the study of religion and religious movements were out of favor, research on NRMs was being done. Dawson, in eight sections, has put together 17 papers that cover the field in a masterful manner. The readings, all of which have been previously published, deal with a wide range of topics. Many are what one might expect, covering such areas as the study of NRMs (Barker; Beckford); the nature of NRMs (Wallis; Bainbridge and Stark); the historical and social context of NRMs (Jenkins; Wuthnow); who joins NRMs (Dawson; Levine); the brainwashing controversy (Singer; Richardson; Robbins); violence (Hall; Mayer); and NRMs and the future (Stark; Dawson and Hennebry). Additionally, there is the unexpected, ranging from sex and gender issues (Puttick; Palmer) to NRMs and the internet (Dawson and Hennebry). As well, Dawson's introductory essay to the volume and brief introductions to each section are invaluable additions.

Without slighting any of the readings, some stand out. Among these are Hall's analysis of the movement that Jim Jones created and its end ("The Apocalypse at Jonestown"); Barker's skillfully situating the place scholars who research NRMs in the larger social scientific community ("The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!"); and Dawson's review of research regarding who joins NRMs which shows how far we have come and how far we still have to go ("Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?"). There are at least two other features, aside from the quality of the papers that make this more than a run of the mill reader. First, Dawson provides references in his introductory essays and to each section. This may seem like a small thing, but we have all had the experience of reading similar volumes without such lists and know the difficulties that this can entail. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the volume is readable. Neither the papers nor Dawson's introductory essays are burdened with the latest fashionable jargon that seems to typify much that passes for social

scientific writing today. Dawson's decision to limit the material to the best literature? "that are well written and readily understood by students and non specialists?" (2), and to lightly edit and shorten (indicating where this was done) clearly demonstrates what the role of an editor should be.

The only drawback to the volume is its overwhelming North America focus. As a result, one could come away from reading this collection with the view that NRMs are a peculiarly North American phenomenon. The inclusion of material about NRMs in Latin America, Asia or the Middle East could have added a comparative dimension that is lacking in the volume. This is a small criticism since the aim of the collection is to provide an overview of NRMs in modern society which was done and done very well. This is a collection that was a pleasure to read. It certainly has a place in the library of any specialist in the field. It also has a place in relevant sociology of religion courses and in any religious studies course that deals with religious movements/groups. It also can be of great utility for any non-specialist who is interested in the phenomenon.

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