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The Power in Multiplying: Growth in New Religious Movements

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The Power in Multiplying:
Growth in New Religious Movements

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major in Religious Studies
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Abstract

Starting in November of 2016, a documentary series aired on the original network A&E where it continues to capture the attention of thousands of viewers in America. *Scientology: The Aftermath*, starring the well-known *King of Queens* and *Dancing with the Stars* actress Leah Remini and former senior executive of the church of Scientology International and Sea Organization Mike Rinder, aim to reveal the “truth” that hides behind the church of Scientology. The show interviews ex-practitioners who claim their lives have been deeply impacted by the church and who want to assist in revealing the shocking stories of abuse and harassment the church tries to keep secret. The goal of the show, in short, is to not only share the “real” face of Scientology to the public, but to also reach out and assist people who have been affected personally by the church; some have lost their family and friends while others have been followed or monitored by church members.

A simple Google search on Scientology brings up multiple news headlines on the church being labeled as a “cult” and “criminal” while magazines in the lines of grocery stores display the downfall on the marriage of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes due to the intensity of the Church of Scientology. Yet Scientology isn’t alone in receiving negative attention from the media. Christian Science has been accused of depriving the ill of

needed medical attention which has led to some members becoming severely ill and dying in some cases. Most of these cases are children that were deprived of needed medical assistance due to their parents' religious views. Religious Studies scholar, Mary Bednarowski, adds that due to these circumstances, Christian Science has long experienced harsh criticism. With families and anti-cult movements protesting in the streets, ads, books, and magazines displaying their opposition, and the media labeling these movements as "dangerous", why would people join and remain in these New Religious Movements? What is it that makes these religious movements alluring and what are their adherents benefiting from them?

Dedication

To my family. Thank you for your continuous love and encouragement.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to thank my lord and savior, Jesus Christ for the many blessings that has led me to this opportunity. I would also like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Ann Gleig who has gone above and beyond as a mentor and professor. Thank you for your constant support, patience, and enthusiasm throughout this lengthy process. I would like to extend my gratitude to my other committee member, Dr. Sabatino DiBernardo for his thoughtful insights and guidance. Lastly, I would like to show my appreciation to my family and friends who have been my cheerleaders every step of the way. Thank you all for your commitment in helping me succeed.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	4
Methodology	7
Thesis Aim	10
History of the Religious Landscape in America.....	11
<i>A New World</i>	11
<i>Moving Forward</i>	12
Background on New Religious Movements.....	16
Growth in New Religious Movements.....	19
<i>Religious Diversity</i>	21
<i>The Information Revolution</i>	22
<i>Rise of Consumer Culture</i>	23
Christian Science	26
Scientology	30
New Religious Movements as Cults?	33
Why do people stay in New Religious Movements?.....	37
Interview Findings	40

Conclusion.....	45
Bibliography.....	49

Introduction

The quest to define the term “religion” is a complicated one. With roughly X amounts of religions and spiritual traditions, how is there to be a single definition of religion that would relate to them all? Scholar Michael McDowell states “the universality of religion might be undeniable but defining the notion of “religion” presents a perennial difficulty for philosophers of religion.”¹ While some people describe religion as a set of beliefs and practices, others may view religion as anything that is treated with the utmost importance. It appears finding a universal term for religion is a hopeless task. Religious studies scholars share their varied thoughts and approaches in defining religion as well as what makes someone or something religious. Paul Tillich shares his definition of religion by stating:

Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern...manifest in the moral sphere as the unconditional seriousness of moral demand...in the realm of knowledge as the passionate longing for ultimate reality...in the aesthetic function of the human spirit as the infinite desire to express ultimate meaning. [Religion is not a] special function of man’s spiritual life, but the dimension of depth in all its functions.²

From another direction, Ninian Smart suggests that religion be understood as a “worldview of belief which, through symbols and actions, mobilizes the feelings and

¹ Michael McDowell and Nathan Brown, *World Religions at your Fingertips* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2009), 2.

² Jonathan Z. Smith “Religion, Religions, Religious”, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2004) 280.

wills of human beings”.³ Turning towards the anthropological definition of religion, Melford E. Spiro states it is “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings”.⁴ In addition to the beliefs of these scholars, Jonathan Z. Smith adds religion can be defined in various ways which leads to a plethora of theoretical approaches in studying religion.⁵ He goes on to discuss the appendix of James H. Leuba’s *Psychological Study of Religion* which lists more than fifty definitions of religion to confirm that it isn’t impossible to define religion, rather there are many different definitions and perspectives on religion. This is echoed in his statement:

[Religion] is created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as “language” plays in linguistics or “culture” plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.⁶

Clearly, the myriad efforts in search of a universal definition of religion demonstrates a somewhat futile task. For the purpose of this thesis, I define religion specifically as a set of practices and beliefs that may provide insight to a true purpose or meaning for any individual or community; religion is whatever an individual or group makes it to be by their own creation. As a result of this, there are numerous diverse perspectives and approaches in studying religion. Within these approaches,

³ Ibid., 281.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 269.

⁶ Ibid.

the category of New Religious Movements is a distinct one. According to religious studies scholar and author Rupert Till, NRMs are reflections on the changes within society.⁷ This is mirrored when he states “They are an artefact of postmodern culture, of liquid times or the post-historical, of the era we are living in. That they are prominent and numerous is perhaps the result of the impact of postmodernity on religion”.⁸ Similarly, Beal defines NRMs as outsider religions to describe those highly individual religious mavericks who live and move and have their being on the social and spiritual margins of society.⁹

NRMs have also been defined in more informal terms as well. Author of the best-selling book *Going Clear*, Lawrence Wright states that the term was used to replace the word “cult”. He further adds academics believe that NRMs are persecuted and ridiculed simply because they are recent and seem exotic.¹⁰ In fact, there are several religions that are considered “cults” instead of NRMs given their new revelations and divergent philosophies from traditional religions. A number of NRMs, including Christian Science and Scientology, remain afloat even after being labeled as “cults”. Given this image in the media, what attracts individuals towards these NRMs? How can seemingly rational people subscribe to the beliefs that seem so

⁷ Till, Rupert. *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010, 1

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2

⁹ Beal, Timothy. *Religion in America: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. Print.2008, 40

¹⁰ Wright, Lawrence. *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*. First Vintage Books Edition. Print, 2013, 281.

absurd and incomprehensible to others?

Literature Review

This thesis will be drawn on both secondary and primary sources as its methodological foundation. The new interviews will be used as supplemental information to enhance my research on NRMs and their practitioners. I have interviewed five practitioners from each group, ten in total, to discuss their beliefs and their thoughts towards the criticism their religions receive. The interviews are in-depth conversations that explore why people are drawn to their religion and how their lives change by becoming members.

In addition to my interviews and observations, much of the material that strengthens the thesis will be composed of scholarly texts. One such scholar is Mary Bednarowski and her research on NRMs. In her book, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America*, she conducts a comparative study between six different nineteenth century and twentieth century religious movements in America. Here, she analyzes common theological themes despite the differences between them. Bednarowski's aim is to demonstrate that NRMs and their interpreters must be seen as participants in theological conversation rather than emerging from "the margins" of cultural conversation.¹¹ In her analysis, Bednarowski quotes the founders and

¹¹ Bednarowski, Mary. *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*. Indiana University Press. ACLS

interpreters of these religious movements. She says:

We cannot make sense of the universe nor can we adequately answer questions of an ultimate nature or interpret human experience without new information or insights or perspectives about God or the ultimate is like and about who we are as human persons-revelations that go beyond that which is contained in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and the traditional interpretations of them by the establish religions.¹²

This rhetoric from the interpreters and founders of these NRMs confirms that the interpretive tasks of these new religions is to systematize the revelations of their founders and to offer alternative interpretations for terms such as “salvation” and “enlightenment”.¹³ Consequently, the sincerity of these movements remain controversial. While scholars like Bednarowski support NRMs and their determination to be recognized as legitimate religions, other scholars may be not as accepting and instead, more skeptical.

This is where Lawrence Wright’s *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, & the Prison of Belief* comes into play. Instead of looking into what the founders believe, Wright takes a different approach and observes the current and former members of Scientology. He approaches this religious movement from a critical perspective, interviewing ex-practitioners on their experience while involved in Scientology and

Humanities E-book, EBSCOhost, (accessed November 13, 2017).1989, 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

the consequences they had to face once they wanted out. Throughout the text, Wright battles between the alluring words and teachings of L. Ron Hubbard and the interviews concerning brainwashing techniques and abuse. Armed with more than one hundred interviews and archival research, Wright aims to uncover the innards of the church, its emotional and physical treatment brought upon members, and its' phenomenal wealth.

In his book, *Religion in America*, Timothy Beal describes many aspects of religions in America. From Native American traditions to "hybrid" religious identities and the expansion of new religions, Beal offers an engaging overview of the history of America's religions. While a central theme in Beal's text is focused on the emergence of religion from the nation's founding, he also emphasizes the diversity of the religious landscape in America. As a result, he dives into the emergence of NRMs and considers all religions beginning as NRMs. Beal deems NRMs as a combination of emergence and divergence in that they emerge from other religious traditions yet diverge far enough that they can no longer be identified with their religious roots.¹⁴ Essentially, Beal claims no religion is born *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.¹⁵ He echoes this view by stating:

Buddhism was an NRM emerging and diverging from other Indian religious traditions. The Baha'i Faith was an NRM emerging and diverging from Shi'ite Islam in nineteenth-century Persia. Christianity was a NRM emerging and diverging from

¹⁴ Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 40.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ancient Israelite and to a lesser extent, Greco-Roman religious traditions.¹⁶

With this concept, Beal further argues that NRMs continue to grow in membership size every passing year as well as numbers in groups or individuals whose religious identities involve hybrid combinations of elements from different religious traditions.¹⁷

Methodology

The methodology used in this thesis will consist primarily of interviews with current practitioners from both Christian Science and Scientology. The thesis will use Bednarowski's approach to studying NRMs as taking the theological efforts of these new religions seriously. As a means to further develop my argument, I will take into account the sacred scriptures and texts of both the NRMs being placed in the spotlight to assist the reader in understanding the concepts of the religions as well as to differentiate between the arguments made by the interpreters versus what critics and scholars say. Further, I adopt the functionalist approach in this thesis, which classifies anything as a religion if it functions similarly to, and carries essential characteristics and traits of, conventionally recognized religions.¹⁸ Despite the media and press

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

¹⁸ McCutcheon, Russell T. *Studying Religion: An Introduction*. Oakville, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2007, 93.

highlighting the negative on these NRMs, I suggest they function similarly to traditional religions and therefore are legitimate forms of religion whose revelations and meaning should be taken seriously. In conjunction with using Bednarowski's argument in defense of NRMs as offering new revelations, this thesis will also suggest that these new religions are more appealing than traditional religions hence arguing why there has been an increase in membership within NRMs. To accomplish this, the body of the thesis will be divided into four main sections. The first section will focus on the emergence and history of NRMs. This chapter will explore the different dimensions of NRMs and how they have increased their numbers in membership over the last few decades. There will also be two subsections under this chapter that specifically outline the history and beliefs and practices as well as the accusations made against two NRMs, Christian Science and Scientology. Because the first section will center exclusively on the general themes of NRMs, it will provide the foundation for what is to be elucidated in the following sections.

The second section will focus on the impacts of the accusations that have been made against NRMs. With mainstream media and global news often bashing these religions, this has caused a negative outlook on NRMs which many people are labeling "cults". I will investigate the term "cult," particularly exploring the similarities and differences between a cult and a NRM. Given the negative associations with the former, it is crucial to distinguish between the two.

The third section will review scholars' explanations for why people are drawn

to NRMs given the amount of negative press they receive worldwide. Here, the reader is able to fully understand the elements that draw people into these religious institutions including the claims they make, the services they provide, and how they market to the community. This section will also explore scholarly explanations of why people may stay in these movements. These explanations range from the rejection of traditional institutions to brainwashing techniques.

The final section will discuss the findings of the analysis of the interviews that were conducted with current practitioners of Christian Science and Scientology. The interviews act as the basis for the thesis in that the members share what brought them into their religious movement and why they have chosen to stay even after such traditions have been labeled as “dangerous” and “cults” to the public at large. There are various approaches that are used by scholars to determine what makes a NRM appealing or what people may believe to be classified as a legitimate religion. The conclusion of this section will address the authority of the interviewees and what they have to say about their religion and personal, spiritual paths.

Thesis Aim

It is the goal of this thesis to give an explanation as to why people are attracted to and join NRMs. This thesis is analytical in that I investigate the critical perspectives from scholars to identify the condemnatory responses to NRMs. By reviewing existing

scholarship and conducting interviews of practitioners involved in these NRMs, I then give a rationale as to why conventional people choose to join and stay devoted to these religious institutions despite the negative press and views from the public who deem them as “unusual” or “cult-like”. In doing so, this thesis can serve as a foundation for providing further sociological research on why people may join other NRMs given their negative press such as Paganism and Rastafari, to name a few. In this project, I specifically observe positive experiences from practitioners to identify what appealed them to either Scientology or Christin Science. However, for future research I will consider the experiences of ex-practitioners from both groups to examine what these two religious movements may be doing to turn people away and why some ex-practitioners protest against these movements. Additionally, exploring the various arguments for what makes an organization or community religious would further introduce research on the religious characteristics in popular music such as rave and Hip-Hop or popular culture such as the religion based from *Star Wars*, known as Jediism. To dive even further into the dimensions of religion, one could explore what makes any individual religious or why individuals may feel the need to be spiritual or belong to a faith-based community, even without them realizing it.

History of the Religious Landscape in America

In order for us to gain some insight on the emergence of NRMs and how they have come to impact the lives of Americans today, it is crucial to browse through the history of religions in America. Although there is no single narrative of religion beginning in America, we are able to identify three influences that continue to shape religion in America today; the dispossession of Native Americans and their indigenous traditions, the struggle for religious freedom, and revivalism.¹⁹ These three significant marks in history have drastically changed the way Americans view and participate in religion.

A New World

On October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus documented his arrival to the New World in his diary. He recorded sightings of the natives whom were the Taino Arawak, natives of the island that the Spaniards called Hispaniola (now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic).²⁰ Columbus took note of the natives and their stature as well as their obedience and reports, "They should be good and intelligent servants for I see they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me they had no religion".²¹

¹⁹ Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²¹ *Ibid.*

While the day of Thanksgiving is viewed nationwide as a grateful harvest full of family and thanks, the story behind it is much more brutal. Columbus and many other conquistadors did in fact kidnap, torture, and enslave these natives in pursuit of gold.²² Although, this was only the beginning for what lay ahead. For the next few centuries, this story was repeated as Europeans traveled west in search for fur, slaves, and gold. However, Beal states that the settlers didn't conquer the lands just for fortunes, but also for religious self -understanding.²³ He further states:

...they[settlers] believed themselves to be part of a story of biblical proportions. According to their fantasy drama, they were the chosen people, the New Israel, entering a land of milk and honey promised to them by God. The indigenous peoples were forced to play the biblical role of the Canaanites. By divine right, the new Israelites were to conquer and drive them out.²⁴

Moving Forward

The battle of religious freedom continued as the extent of civil authority played a major role in religion. Looking at the American Revolutionary War (1776-83), it was a struggle for national liberty but also for religious liberty.²⁵ Beal recalls that in the old world, where church and state were seen as one, American Protestants with a long history in England of resistance to the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of

²² Ibid., 60.

²³ Ibid., 62.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 69.

England, resisted the authority of both.²⁶ Consequently, what led toward independence were the sermons and essays of Protestant ministers that argued every individual stands alone before God and is accountable for his or her own faith and conscience.²⁷ Scholar Michael Pasquier adds that the American War of Independence was a political revolution and military confrontation that involved Christians on all sides.²⁸ He further states, “the diverse claims of Protestants and Deists contributed to the ratification of the First Amendment to the Constitution, which set the foundation for legal arguments over the establishment and free exercise of religion in the United States” .²⁹

As Pasquire states, Protestant denominations experienced unprecedented growth in the early American republic.³⁰ Particular denominations including Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians gained religious and political influence during a period that would come to be known as the Great Awakenings from the 1730’s to the 1800’s.³¹ These “harvests” were highly emotional, charismatic styles of preaching and worship that emphasized a mass conversion experience.³² These mass conversions were viewed as the beginning of the revivalist movements. Beal stresses the significance of the Great Awakening by stating, “in some respects the Great Awakening was the first American

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 70.

²⁸ Pasquier, Michael. *Religion in America*. Routledge: London and New York. *UCF Libraries Catalog, EBSCOhost*, (accessed October 16, 2017). 2017, 82.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 75.

ecumenical movement. In order to work together to promote revivalism, several Christian denominations tabled their differences".³³ Although the Great Awakening is known for its "camp meetings" where thousands of people were drawn to preach, sing, and dance, this era is also recognized as incorporating race and gender into the movement. Some racially mixed congregations had African American ministers, including women.³⁴ Beal states, "in many other cases, however, racist practices of segregation within congregations including being refused Communion and being relegated to balcony spaces led African Americans eventually to part ways and start their own denominations".³⁵

Having touched on some elements on the subject of the history of the religious landscape in America, we are able to observe how the landscape has adapted and changed to include traditions from all over. Historical events such as the American Revolutionary War and the era of the Great Awakening were vital in the arrival of various religions in America. These historical movements became a locus of religious power as women and African Americans had been enforced to emote, speak, and pray openly.³⁶ Beal adds that the history of revivalism has raised the value of an individual's religious experience.³⁷ He further states that NRMs begin with a single person's claim to

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 80.

³⁵ Ibid., 81.

³⁶ Ibid., 86.

³⁷ Ibid., 88.

have had a religious experience or divine revelation. “In the eyes of many Americans, such a personal experience is enough to legitimate a new religion”.³⁸

³⁸ Ibid.

Background on New Religious Movements

The term “new religious movement” is applicable to faiths considered “new” or emerging from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are a few commonalities that exist between New Religious Movements in that they are usually characterized as a devoted gathering of followers who are led by an authoritarian or charismatic leader thought as divine or being closely associated with the divine.³⁹ The majority of these movements are also characterized as being harmful in that they are accused of drawing the public away from traditional institutional religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. They are regarded as countercultural in that they are perceived to be alternatives to, and combine practices and doctrines from, these mainstream religions.⁴⁰ One way to distinguish between older, established religions from their newer equivalents is by their leaders. “The leaders of NRMs are usually alive or recently deceased in comparison to figures such as Jesus, Mohamed, or Buddha, usually less than 300 years old.⁴¹ Although NRMs are relatively new, compared to their traditional counterparts, they seem to have captured the attention of thousands of Americans.

³⁹ Rubinstein, Murray. (2016, April 29). *New Religious Movements*. Retrieved from <http://www.britanica.com>. Encyclopedia Britannica. Website. Accessed 10/10/2017

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Till, *Pop Cult*, 2010, 3.

The early United States were dominated, culturally and governmentally, by a strong majority identified with Christianity despite the wide range of religious traditions represented. As Beal states, “it was in many respects, a Christian country”.⁴² It wasn’t until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that we begin to observe the emergence of new religious movements in America.⁴³ Additionally, Pasquier recalls that the first half of the nineteenth century was marked by incredible religious experimentation among groups that deviated from orthodox forms of Christianity.⁴⁴ He further adds that the religious innovations of the Second Great Awakening weren’t restricted to manifestations of evangelical Protestantism, in fact, there were new religious movements such as Unitarianism and Mormonism that represented theological departures from the Christian tradition.⁴⁵ “While it can be said that these new religious movements remained at the fringe of American religious life, they nonetheless demonstrate the incredible versatility and experimentation of religion in the United States”.⁴⁶

Timothy Beal agrees that religious diversity, along with NRMs in America, is on the rise.⁴⁷ He suggests America has proven to be fertile ground for NRMs by arguing that the founding of national principles such as religious freedom, separation between

⁴² Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 91.

⁴³ Rubinstein, (2016, April 29). *New Religious Movements*. Retrieved from <http://www.britanica.com>.
Encyclopedia Britannica

⁴⁴ Pasquire, *Religion in America*, 2017, 83.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁷ Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 41.

church and state, and the abundance of available land from the colonial times to the present have served as excellent conditions for the birth of NRMs.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Growth in New Religious Movements

The majority of scholars agree that NRMs have contributed to the diversity of the religious landscape in America which continues to expand. To assess the religious diversity of America today, it may be helpful to draw on a reliable survey whose research is focused on the self-identification of Americans. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), which collected answers from over fifty thousand respondents, tracks the changes in religious loyalties of the U.S adult population from 1990 to 2008.⁴⁹ In terms of specific religious affiliation, the survey revealed a marked increase in preferences for personalized and idiosyncratic responses as well as increases in the Neo-pagan groups.⁵⁰ The ARIS displayed an increase in NRMs and “other religions” (which include Pagan, Wiccan, New Age, Scientology, Santeria, etc.) from 0.8% in 1990 to 1.2% in 2008.⁵¹ As for Traditional Religions, the percentage of Americans who identified themselves as non-denominational Christians had a 10.2% decrease from 1990 to 2008 while the percentage of Americans who identified themselves with a specific religion decreased from 89.5% to 79.9%.⁵² Drawing results from another survey whose sample is more than 101,000 Americans from all 50 states conducted in 2016, non-Christian religious groups including “other religions”, Buddhists, and Hindus, are

⁴⁹ Keysar, A. and Kosmin, B. *American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008*. Trinity College. Hartford, CT. Retrieved 15 November 2017.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

growing but still represent less than one in ten Americans.⁵³ However, according to Pew Research Center, more Americans are describing themselves as “spiritual but not religious” with a majority at roughly 37% being religiously unaffiliated or belonging to “other religions”.⁵⁴ These surveys further demonstrate that NRMs are growing in membership as people stray away from their traditional roots.

It is important to note that Scientology and Christian Science are experiencing opposite responses concerning their growth in membership. While Scientology has been slowly increasing in membership, Christian Science has undergone a steep decline due to advances in modern medicine and their ineffective attempts to socialize with the young.⁵⁵ In an essay, Rodney Stark states “to succeed, religious movements must socialize the young sufficiently well as to minimize both defection and the appeal of reduced strictness”.⁵⁶ While Scientology has successfully appealed to younger generations by advertising its relaxed philosophy and modern practices, Christian Science is set in its rigorous teachings, dismissing medicine all together. In the GSS data, 80 persons reported that they have been raised as Christian Scientists, but only 33% of them remained members.⁵⁷ Although Christian Science is

⁵³ Cox, D. and Jones, R. Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). *America's Changing Religious Identity*. September, 6th, 2017. <https://www.prrri.org/research>

⁵⁴ Lipka, M. and Gecewicz, C. *More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious*. Pew Research Center. September, 6th, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank>

⁵⁵ Rodney, Stark. *The rise and fall of Christian science*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 13:2, 189-214, DOI: 10.1080/13537909808580830. 1998, 208.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

declining, NRMs, as a whole, are on the rise. I label Christian Science as an exception in that the majority of its practitioners are over the age of forty, leaving the younger generations out of their practices.

Aside from these surveys, there are other factors that contribute to the growth in NRMs. Beal discusses the three major forces shaping the present and future of religions in America; the rise in religious diversity, the information revolution, and the rise of consumer culture.⁵⁸

Rise of Religious Diversity

It is fair to say that America is considered the melting pot due to its expansive diversity in race, religion, and culture. Yet, how has it come to this? Diana L. Eck asks, “how has an essentially Christian country become the most religiously diverse nation in the world?”⁵⁹ Eck further points out that the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 sparked a tremendous unprecedented growth of religious diversity in America.⁶⁰ With this, we can easily observe how a mix of cultures and various beliefs can impact the religious landscape in America. Beal further observes the increase in diversity causing the rise of NRMs by examining the United States Census Data that reads:

- The percentage of Americans who are foreign born has doubled since 1990, to

⁵⁸ Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 90.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

more than 10 percent

- In the last decade of the twentieth century, the Asian population in the United States grew by 43 percent to nearly 10.8 million
- Between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population grew by 38.8 percent to more than 31.3 million⁶¹

As various cultures make their way into America, the spread of religious and spiritual ideas also spread, almost creating a need for NRMs in that they may offer different, more accommodating insights than the traditional religions that many are straying away from.

The Information Revolution

Beal suggests that the inventions of the personal computer, World Wide Web, and digitization have contributed greatly to the growth in NRMs.⁶² Indeed, many religious institutions are posting about themselves on the internet to make themselves more accessible and available to those who may be curious or want to explore the religion. The rising information society empowers people and groups to form their own, networked social identities, including religious identities.⁶³ Beal further explores

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 98.

⁶³ Ibid.

the power the internet has on religions. As the need for information, and access to information, increases religious organizations are able to access a larger audience and have relationships with them. International call-in radio shows, skype meetings, and other communication technologies allow people to form relationships with like-minded people as well as like-spirited people all over the world, creating a virtual community.⁶⁴

Rise of Consumer Culture

Shopping is no longer considered “retail therapy”, it is now a way of life in modern day America.⁶⁵ In my studies, I have observed two different ways to shop when it comes to religion; the spiritual shopper and the material shopper. The spiritual shopper is an individual who searches for an institution that is right for them based on various factors including the beliefs and practices of the organization as well as the community. For example, a spiritual shopper may find peace in their local church yet may also feel they reach total enlightenment when they meditate at a Buddhist temple. Nowadays, it is relatively common to come across a spiritual shopper who may take specific rituals, beliefs, and practices from multiple religions and apply it to their daily lives. As unusual or unorthodox as it may seem, some individuals feel that one religious tradition may not serve all their needs or even provide all the answers they search for. Therefore, they pick and choose what they believe to be true from various religions and

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 99.

combine them, creating their own religion. This is also known as hybrid religions which unifies with NRMs as they increase in membership. Aside from spiritual shoppers, think about the multiple ways people may be “bought” into a religion or religious group. “Spreading the word” is a common practice in some religions where members are encouraged to speak to others about their religion or read passages from their sacred scriptures.⁶⁶ Similarly, people may sell Sacred texts such as the Bible or Quran off the streets or in stores to spark interest to the public. While these are common ways of “buying” into a religion, there are other ways that may not seem so obvious. As Beal points out, religions have proven to be marketable, especially with ritual objects and images.⁶⁷ He further states:

If you don’t agree, just browse through your nearby Pier 1 Imports or World Market and count the Buddha’s, Shiva’s, Ganesh’s, Confucius’s, prayer rugs, Blessed Virgin Mary’s, Saint Francis’s, ghost catchers, prayer beads, and crosses. And watch for them on television in shows about communicating with the dead or supernatural horror films. Religion is selling.⁶⁸

Indeed, with the rise of religious diversity, access to religion online, and consumer culture we also witness a rise in various religious identities. As fewer and fewer Americans are raised with a strong sense of traditional religious affiliation, many are creating their own ensembles or mashups of religious identity.⁶⁹ This makes the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 102.

emergence of NRMs as well as hybrid religions more accessible due to the cultural and political changes occurring drastically in modern day America.

Christian Science

Although it is not the largest NRM to date, Christian Science has remained an influential religion, also known as a popular mind science, since its founding in 1879.⁷⁰ On Sunday mornings or Wednesday evenings Christian Scientists share testimonials of their insight and healings and study their scriptures at the Church of Christ, Scientist.⁷¹ It is here where members engage with each other to discuss the miracles of God. You can also find Christian Scientists in Reading Rooms which serve as free educational centers for the public and are often located on busy streets where practitioners share their testimonies as well as their beliefs in God.⁷²

Christian Science, as a whole, is a NRM that rests on the belief that God is infinite love and that even a glimpse of this through prayer has the power to heal and restore any individual. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, taught that the love of God is the most powerful tool in the world. Her journey through the development of Christian Science was shaped by a desire for healing, both physical and emotional.⁷³ For Eddy, this began when she experienced a dramatic recovery from a critical injury in 1866 by reading a biblical account of one of Jesus' healings. As she turned to the Bible for guidance, she recognized the power of Jesus' healings of the ill and decided that full

⁷⁰ Bickel, B. and Jantz, S. *World Religions and Cults 101: A Guide to Spiritual Beliefs*. Harvest House Publishers. Eugene, OR. Print. 2002,132.

⁷¹ Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 15.

⁷² Bickel and Jantz, *World Religions and Cults 101*, 2002, 134.

⁷³ Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*, 1989, 11.

reliance on God would open ways for him to heal her as well.⁷⁴ Although she was raised as a Calvinist, Eddy was exposed in her searching to the healing methods of Phineas P. Quimby. It was through the Bible and healing methods of Phineas P. Quimby that Eddy sought out the laws of God that would form her teachings in the Church of Christ, Scientist.⁷⁵

Alongside the Bible, Eddy's primary work, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* would also become Christian Scientist's central text. However, Eddy's beliefs departed from Christianity in that she gave rise to a new revelation that provided a different understanding of how the universe operates.⁷⁶ In her book, she teaches that sickness is an illusion that can be corrected through the power of prayer. Bednarowski adds "she stated her radical premise that matter does not exist. That which our senses seem to detect I illusory, because the material senses cannot detect Spirit and therefore give false testimony about the nature of reality".⁷⁷ The materialistic world and even death itself is a false belief and an individual may be able to see their true image through God's inevitable love. It is when an individual gives into these illusions, including the belief that one may be ill, that he or she is distracted from God, tarnishing their relationship and trust with God. The main belief here is that since God is perfect, then everything he creates is perfect. The material world is full of disease, chaos, and

⁷⁴ Bickel and Jantz, *World Religions and Cults* 101, 2002, 134.

⁷⁵ Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*, 1989, 11.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

death therefore the material world is man-made, and humans need to fully rely on God in order to see that they are “beyond” the material world.⁷⁸ This sentiment from a practitioner of Christian Science is mirrored in Bednarowski’s statement that if matter is unreal, then, likewise, evil, sickness, pain, and death are unreal.⁷⁹

Rennie B. Schoepflin, author of *Christian Science on Trial*, further examines the thoughts of Christian Scientists and sickness. She states, “whereas physicians wanted to diagnose a patient’s disease in order to apply a specific treatment, for Christian Scientists identifying the disease or naming it was not only irrelevant but dangerous”.⁸⁰ According to Christian Scientists, naming the disease only increased the fear of the patient, confirming an error of belief and giving into the illusion of the materialistic world. It is this belief that has caused much negative media attention on Christian Science as a “harmful” religion. “They ran head-on into a medical community outraged by the public health dangers of “untreated” contagious diseases and convinced that medicine could save sick children while Christian Science could not”.⁸¹

Christian Scientists fully accept the promises of Jesus in that “whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing and they will do even greater things...”⁸² Christian Science claims that anyone can learn and apply these spiritually scientific

⁷⁸ Sims, Gail. (2017, October 01). Personal Interview.

⁷⁹ Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*, 1989, 11.

⁸⁰ Schoepflin, R.B. *Christian Science on Trial: Religious Healing in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. *Ebook collection, (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 13, 2017).2003, 63.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸² Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, John 14:12 by [Biblica, Inc.®](#)

ideas to prove God's grace. For them, the power of healing goes beyond curing illness, it has the power to restore and reform lives. For example, most Christian Scientists that were interviewed shared similar ideas on how a full reliance on God heals relationships, financial hardships, etc. However, this was not the case for Douglas and Rita Swan. In 1979, a Phil Donahue T.V show featured two angry Christian Science parents who, despite practitioner treatment, had lost their fifteen-month old son to meningitis.⁸³ The show sparked an attack on Christian Science and the Mother Church along with its practitioners was charged with negligence. The parents then founded CHILD (Children's Healthcare Is a Legal Duty Inc.) to mount nationwide crusade against all religious healers who ignored medical science.⁸⁴

⁸³ Schoepflin, *Christian Science on Trial*, 2003, 204.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

Scientology

Like Mary Baker Eddy, L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, experimented with alternate ideas of healing and escaping suffering. Bednarowski states:

both Christian Science and Scientology make radical statements about the need for humankind to escape from the spiritually deadening and illusory bonds of earth and flesh. In such world views, the constant quest is for the knowledge and understanding of the true nature of reality, with the assumption that the material world is not the place in which to achieve it.⁸⁵

Additionally, Bednarowski says if Eddy looked to the healing message of the Bible and her own metaphysical insight to provide the building blocks for her new model of the universe, L. Ron Hubbard turned instead to more contemporary sources.⁸⁶ Published in 1950, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, serves as the sacred text for Scientologists. The book is a combination of psychological and theological scientific research that developed as an alternative means of assisting people with mental and spiritual health. Hubbard calls this the “anatomy of the mind”.⁸⁷ Aside from reading Hubbard’s texts, an individual may uncover their true self by exposing themselves to a specific therapy session called “auditing”. In the auditing process, an individual is interviewed to rid emotional baggage that may hinder their success towards becoming “clear”, a significant stage in a Scientologist’s training.⁸⁸ This process allows for a person

⁸⁵ Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*, 1989, 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ McDowell, M. and Brown, N. *World Religions at your Fingertips*. Penguin Group Publishing, 2009, 268.

to reflect on their unconscious thoughts and learn to control them through the tools (DVD's, books, audio tapes) issued to them by the church. Scientologists stress the application of its teachings and techniques and when properly placed into effect, an individual may gain conscious control over their mind, body, and spirit to end psychosomatic suffering. One may find these practices to be simple and view eternal life through reincarnation as accessible with the help of the tools provided. At a glance, Scientology is providing an alternative path for those who reject or do not find comfort in traditional religions. They seek to help others find their own way to living a better life and ultimately knowing how to take on everyday challenges that range from dealing with difficult people to managing stress.⁸⁹ Bednarowski adds that Scientologists further describe themselves as working to create a world where abuses of freedom do not occur, as well as a world where "men of goodwill work together to expose and stall efforts of the few who abuse their rights and powers against the well-being of mankind".⁹⁰

Surely there are few NRMs that have been subjects to controversy and scandals than Scientology. The church of Scientology has been attacked by anti-cult movements, former practitioners, the media, and even government agencies for mistreatment of devotees, abuse, harassment, and claims of brainwashing. As Hugh Urban states, "Scientology raises some of the most profound legal, ethical, and political questions that lie at the very heart

⁸⁹ Hubbard, Ron L. *Dianetics: A Handbook of Dianetics Procedure*. Los Angeles, CA: Bridge Publications, c1991. Print. 1991.

⁹⁰ Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*, 1989, 114.

of the study of religion in the twenty-first century”.⁹¹ Further, he recalls a series in the St. Petersburg Times in June of 2009 that was centered on the current head of the Church of Scientology, David Miscavige. “Using interviews from former high-ranking executives, the Times recounts an array of alleged abuse, violence, and humiliation at the very top of the church’s hierarchy that ranges from the shocking to the downright bizarre”.⁹²

Additionally, another critique of the Church of Scientology has come from one particular figure, Leah Remini. Remini, who was a member of Scientology for over forty years, talks about the hardships she experienced while growing up in the Church with her mother and sister. She discusses the church’s in-justice and wrong doing as well as the secrets they have tried to hide from the public. Her popular documentary series with Mike Rinder, also a former Scientologist, aims to gather enough evidence against the Church to hold an FBI investigation. Remini’s book, *Troublemaker: Surviving Hollywood and Scientology*, has also captured the public’s attention with its stories of abuse and mistreatment towards members. Remini, among many others who threaten the church, are powerful in their numbers and are seen as a danger to Scientologists.

⁹¹ Urban, Hugh.B. (2011). *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. *EBook collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 16, 2017), 1.

⁹² Ibid.

New Religious Movements as Cults?

Despite the efforts of Christian Science and Scientology members, there seems to be an ongoing debate as to whether these institutions are valid religions or cults. The difference between the two is significant in that traditional religions are viewed as organized, established and legitimate institutions whereas the term “cult” is a negative term given to NRMs that are seen as dangerous and unorthodox. There are a few characteristics that define a cult, according to anti-cult groups and those who study the sociology of religion. Scholars such as Catherine Wessinger and James R. Lewis have argued that the term “cult” has become encumbered with negative connotations among the public at large and have advised to drop the term in academia. Wessinger further maintains that “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 their leader”.⁹³ Similarly, Lewis adds that “minority religions lose their chance at a fair hearing as soon as the label “cult” is successfully applied to them”.⁹⁴ Additionally, Till points out that there are several religious movements of various ages that have been labeled as cults, including Christian Science and Scientology.⁹⁵ Although I in no way suggest these

⁹³ Olson, J Paul. *The Public Perception of “Cults” and “New Religious Movements”*. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. Vol. 45, No. 1 (Mar., 2006), pp.97-106.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Till, *Pop Cults*, 2010, 2.

definitions are accurate, it is worthwhile to investigate debates around “cults” to understand why people would choose to stay devoted to a religion with such negative views from the public.

As Till explains, cults are defined as having three major characteristics. The first is that there is a strong dedication to a single person who is thought to have special connections with the divine or perhaps is divine themselves. This may stimulate worship to the leader, giving them a god-like presence to the community. Consequentially, an intense, high level of commitment is promoted. Till recalls “this level of involvement is sometimes seen as damaging relationships with family members, and as creating an us-versus-them mentality”.⁹⁶ Similarly, cults are also viewed as secretive and isolating their members from the thoughts of the outside world. Perhaps they don’t want their members to be tainted with the negative thoughts the rest of the world has on them, causing them to doubt and abandon their community. For example, it is said that Scientologists are discouraged from looking into the internet searches of Scientology or the head of the church, David Miscavige. With so many rumors, Till mentions that it may be a certain level of commitment that must be proven to become a full, inducted member of the community.⁹⁷

Another characteristic of a cult is that they are often accused of manipulating

⁹⁶ Till, *Pop Cults*, 2010, 3.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

their members with mind control, peer pressure, or even abuse. This may be seen as a way to keep control over the members and persuade them that their community is on the right path to enlightenment while all others are lost and still searching for a way. Although abuse may seem extreme, in some cases reported, the ex-practitioners felt that they had truly done something bad and were being punished as a learning experience.⁹⁸ This mental game is truly intriguing in that it has a strong hold on the practitioners, somehow intensifying their devotion to the community.

Another element that has been used to describe an organization as a cult is their large contribution and strong dedication to the organization. Certain organizations may demand large sums of money from their participants to show their commitment, or to move on in their religious development. Other contributions may include being involved with the organization such as working or volunteering and wearing a uniform or particular style of clothing to separate yourself from the public. This creates a group dynamic where members of the group are encouraged to associate themselves with other members.⁹⁹

Observing the arguments made by Till concerning the definition of a cult, we can conclude that a cult to one person may be seen as a normal religious institution to another. This is repeated in his sentiment:

⁹⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 3.

For some, such as anti-cult groups, cults are the epitome of all that is deviant and dangerous. For others NRMs offer an insight into the way that humans construct meaning within contemporary culture, and into how religions are created and constructed.¹⁰⁰

Till further states that NRMs are a result of the failure of mainstream religions, which have become disconnected from and out of touch with public opinions following the rapid culture change that has occurred in the twentieth century.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, as the change in culture becomes more broad and diverse, so too do the religious boundaries in America. What one person may find repulsive and misleading, another may find a true path towards enlightenment. As traditional religions fail to keep up with the cultural changes, NRMs will become more and more present and with that, more appealing. While the public at large tends to have a negative definition of the term cult, no consensus has been reached among scholars. As a result, I will not adopt the term when classifying Christian Science and Scientology and will instead deem them as Bednarowski's definition of NRMs.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 4.

Why do people stay in New Religious Movements?

A number of scholars have advanced arguments for why people join and remain in NRMs. Some believe techniques of brainwashing are used, others say people grow up in the religion and others still argue people join because they view the religion as offering new insights on the purpose of life.

Beal suggests that NRMs gain membership due to a radical conversion in which an individual breaks definitively from mainstream society and its values.¹⁰² Further, he states that it is no surprise many NRMs in America have aroused suspicion not only from authorities that consider the institutions as “cults” but also from federal governments. This is an interesting argument in that it suggests some people may be unsatisfied with mainstream traditions which causes them to be drawn towards more “unique” or different institutions, shining a spotlight on NRMs.

Another theory of why people join- and stay devoted to- NRMs is that practitioners may be brainwashed. Lawrence Wright, the author of the best-selling book on Scientology *Going Clear*, discusses the theory of brainwashing and the story of Jesse Prince, one of the few black members of the Sea Org in 1976. According to Wright, Prince was attracted to Scientology by the pretty girls and the promise of superhuman powers such as levitating, traveling through time, having control over others thoughts,

¹⁰² Beal, *Religion in America*, 2008, 48.

and having total command over the universe.¹⁰³ Prince recalls a time when he was being punished and was slaved to convert the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital into a dormitory and office space. After being called in to speak with his supervisor about his lack of effort, Prince decided he wanted out. However, he found himself placed in the Rehabilitation Project Force (RPF) where he would be held for eighteen months. “I was literally incarcerated” Prince recalled. “The only way to get out is to learn this tech to a ‘T’ and then be able to apply it”.¹⁰⁴ The brainwashing theory proposes the use of techniques that can overwhelm an individual and may be able to convert their perspectives completely opposite of their previous beliefs. Wright states that Hubbard had become fascinated by the mind-control scare in 1955 and concludes that whether Prince was brainwashed, as he believes, or spiritually enlightened, as the church would have it, his thinking did change over the year and a half spent in the RPF.¹⁰⁵

Another compelling argument on why people join NRMs is made by Bednarowski. She suggests people join new religions because they may be searching for their own definition of the meaning of life or a consistent way of living. In short, she argues the appeal and influence of these new religions is brought about by the homespun qualities and inconsistencies found in traditional institutions.¹⁰⁶ Her book, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America*, provides a counter-argument for

¹⁰³ Wright, *Going Clear*, 2013, 175.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰⁶ Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*, 1989, 2.

new religious movements stating, “they [NRM] join in because they understand themselves as having new revelations to offer, new models of the universe that will address the inadequacies of those meaning systems, religious and secular, that are presently available”.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Interview Findings

No study can account for all the motivations of new religious practitioners. While some practitioners may have been born into a religion, others may have joined later in life because they view that religion as having more value or truth than the major religions. Drawing from ten interviews undertaken between September 2017 to November 2017, this section will discuss why practitioners from both Christian Science and Scientology joined the religious institutions and why they have chosen to stay devoted despite alarming negative press.

The majority of Christian Science and Scientologist practitioners interviewed were either second or third generation practitioners, meaning they were born into the religion and its teachings through their parents. Although, these interviewees were born into their religion, some of them were also keen to point out their own agency in staying in the religion. For example, Amber Skjelset, a second-generation Scientologist practitioner states “of course my parents shared their faiths with me, but it’s a personal push and everyone must experience it for themselves”¹⁰⁸. She took her first course on communication when she was eight years old. “Before the class, I was very shy and had difficulty expressing my thoughts and feelings. I found myself to be very confident after just one course”.¹⁰⁹ For other practitioners however, they were drawn into the religion

¹⁰⁸ Amber Skjelset, Interview with author, September 18, 2017

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

by the expectations it advertised to the public. For example, Scientologists post advertisements along streets and in the windows of buildings about their free personality tests to make the claim that Scientology is able to help an individual identify their flaws and provide tools to help them live better lives. Asia Kuzma, a Scientologist practitioner from Poland, recalls her first encounter with the Church of Scientology while walking through the streets in Dublin, Ireland. "I came across a building with signs all around advertising a free personality test. When I walked in, they said I could learn more about myself by taking the test and then continue to take courses and be involved with the church that would better myself".¹¹⁰ Even now, Ms. Kuzma feels as if she has become a more spiritual person, aware of her mistakes and how to better herself with the assistance of Scientology. Likewise, Christian Scientists set-forth their expectations to the public by claiming unlike traditional religions, they have a full reliance on God to heal them. A practitioner of Christian Science, Linda Sullivan, shares that the promises of Christian Science ranges from having a better relationship with God, as well as others, to being financially stable, to experiencing God's healings first-hand. "God promises healing in all forms".¹¹¹ As these examples show, people are drawn to NRM's because of the expectations set by these religions.

The responses I received from the interviews also indicate that practitioners were intrigued by NRM's because they believed these movements have something to

¹¹⁰ Asia Kuzma, Interview with author, September 18, 2017

¹¹¹ Linda Sullivan, Interview with author, September 26, 2017

offer that mainstream religions do not. Skjelset shared a period in her life when she would attend a community Baptist church with her grandmother. She recalls, “I could see how it works for them, but it wasn’t for me”.¹¹² She was looking for a clearer path to the answers of life and felt that mainstream religions were more focused on “sticking to their roots” and staying traditional rather than assisting their members. Kuzma, a busy business woman in her age, also shares a time when she had turned to meditation for spiritual enlightenment. “I didn’t have time to sit and try to relax my mind and even once I accomplished this, I still felt the burden of my responsibilities after meditating; it was as if I took a nap and woke up to reality again”.¹¹³ Kuzma aimed for a seemingly more accessible route to spiritual enlightenment and felt that Scientology was not only able to help her identify the answers to life, but also to learn how to apply the tools needed to unlock her true potential. As most Christian Scientists would agree, practitioner Gail Sims states that Christian Science branches off from the mainstream religions in that they have a full reliance on God. “Other religions may pray that the doctor knows what he/she is doing, but Christian Scientists rely on God to heal and restore”.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, Sims sees other religions as lacking a trust with God. “They may pray to God yet everyday are distracted by the material world and give in to their worldly desires”.¹¹⁵ For Sims, Christian Science was a way for her to have a better

¹¹² Amber Skjelset, Interview with author, September 18, 2017

¹¹³ Asia Kuzma, Interview with author, September 18, 2017

¹¹⁴ Gail Sims, Interview with author, October 1, 2017

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

relationship with God, fully relying and trusting in him.

Overall, these practitioners feel they have a better understanding of life with these movements and feel that they have more to offer than traditional institutions. Although, Skjelset states there several Muslim-Scientologists and Jewish-Scientologists that feel complete with both institutions. “They may identify as both in that they don’t want to abandon their religion completely yet see the impacts and potential in being a Scientologist as well”.¹¹⁶

Another reason why people may turn to NRM’s is because of the founders themselves. In my interviews, I found that many practitioners felt more comfortable knowing exactly who the founder or leader of the religious movement was that they were a member of. For example, Jesus is not a religious figure that people can see or have photographs of. Society has offered different images of Jesus, yet no one knows what the historical Jesus looked like. Skjelset recalls that although she never had the opportunity to personally meet L. Ron Hubbard, she is amazed that her community had interactions with their leader. “To think that anyone could have a conversation with this man who touched the lives of thousands of people is unbelievable! How many other religions can say they have had first-hand experiences with their founder?”.¹¹⁷ The same can be said for Christian Scientists who had direct relations with Mary Baker Eddy. Both of these religious movements are able to view interviews and sermons from their

¹¹⁶ Amber Skjelset, Interview with author, September 18, 2017

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

founders, view their bibliography, see their photographs, and may have known people who have had personal relationships with the founders. This appeal may contribute to the growth in NRM's.

Conclusion

I conclude that there are multiple explanations for why people may join and remain in NRMs such as Scientology and Christian Science which receive much negative press. In my own interviews, I identified three specific reasons: (i) practitioners were born into the religion; (ii) practitioners were drawn to the religion because they had rejected mainstream traditions and sought an alternative; and (iii) practitioners were intrigued by the interactions with the founders of the religion. Compared to the arguments produced by scholars such as Beal and Bednarowski, I found that my findings confirm their hypotheses of why people are drawn to and remain in NRMs.

In congruence with Beal's argument, my findings confirmed that NRMs gain membership due to an individual breaking definitively from a traditional institution and following a religious movement that they feel best fits their needs. In my interviews with practitioners of Scientology, I found that a few had belonged to other faiths such as Catholicism and Buddhism before coming to the realization that they were not being fulfilled spiritually. For these practitioners, Scientology was able to help them move toward enlightenment while traditional religions seemed to be more concerned with the customary routines and rituals. Consequently, as people stay devoted to these religious movements, their children grow up in them as well. Majority of the practitioners I interviewed are second-generation practitioners and have chosen to stay devoted to these religious movements because they feel they are comfortable in their religion.

These practitioners feel they have acquired their purpose and meaning through their religion and have no intentions of questioning or abandoning it.

Similarly, my findings also suit Bednarowski's argument in that I found, based from the interviews, people join NRMs in search of a particular purpose or meaning in a religion. This was displayed in my interviews with practitioners of both Christian Science and Scientology. The practitioners each had their own, distinct definitions of the meaning of life and a way of living that they found to be true in their religions. For example, a few practitioners of Scientology are convinced that Scientology alone has the correct applications and tools to lead them towards a healthier and happier life as well as the true meaning of life.

One argument my interview findings did not confirm, However, is the theory of brainwashing. Wright discusses brainwashing and how many anti-cult movements as well as scared family members truly believe these NRMs are using techniques of brainwashing along with abuse and manipulation. Despite the negative media and newspapers on the claims of abuse on these NRMs, my findings do not confirm such exercises. Instead, I found that practitioners of both Christian Science and Scientology are content within their religions and faiths and believe that because they are devoted to their religion, they have the necessary tools and practices to change their lives.

One of the motivations for this study was because I often come across people with accusations against NRMs such as "Isn't that a cult?" and "Aren't those people brainwashed?" Because of negative press and a lack of education in religious history,

NRMs seem alien to most of the public and are often labeled as strange and even dangerous in some cases. Yet how can we make valid critiques of NRMs without contributing to their sensationalization? This can be identified by differentiating between a rational and evidence-based critique and a negative stereotype or phobia. For example, how can we distinguish between Islamophobia and a rational critique of certain problematic elements of Islam? According to The Bridge Initiative, a multi-year research project, Islamophobia is prejudice towards or discrimination against Muslims due to their religion, or perceived religious, national, or ethnic identity.¹¹⁸ They continue to state that Islamophobia is not a rational criticism of Islam or Muslims based on factual evidence.¹¹⁹ Therefore, we can give a legitimate critique of NRMs if it is based in valid evidence and not media-biased stereotype. Hence, recognizing discrimination based in fear versus a critique based on facts and evidence is vital when studying NRMs and their members.

Hugh Urban reflects on this topic by observing Scientology. He states, “with a tight system of security and a complex, esoteric hierarchy of teachings, Scientology is surely one of the most impenetrable and least understood new religions”.¹²⁰ As demonstrated, these new movements play a major role in the diversity in America and contribute to the new cultures, traditions, and practices that many people are turning to

¹¹⁸ The Bridge Initiative, Georgetown University. Islamophobia, 2016.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 2013, 2.

today. Despite the negative media attention and controversy concerning these movements, practitioners believe these movements have something valuable to offer that mainstream traditions may not. Similarly, Carole M. Cusack argues scholars should take what she calls “invented” religions seriously because as humans, we create our own realities.¹²¹ Further, she states that at one point every religion was invented. “It begins with a leader sharing a narrative then it story-builds and becomes something to live by”.¹²² Hence, rather than see NRMs as a threat to traditional religion, they should be considered as providing much of the orientation, meaning and comfort of traditional religion.

¹²¹ Cusack, Carole M. *Invented Religions [electronic source] Imagination, Fiction, and Faith*. London: Routledge, 2016. *UCF Libraries Catalog, EBSCOhost*, (accessed November 13, 2017). 2016, 4.

¹²² *Ibid.*

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