

Introduction: When Prophets Die: The Succession Crisis in New Religions

J. Gordon Melton

It is a common assumption among social scientific observers of new religions (popularly termed “cults”) that the period immediately following the death of the founder/leader of a group is critical, a period that generally leads to major disruption and often fatal consequences for the group itself. This widely held assumption is not so much a finding derived from the observation of the phenomenon in specific situations as it is a conclusion drawn from early definitions of the term “cult” and lists of the characteristics of cults. According to the traditional wisdom in the field, among the most important characteristics of a cult (and the one most relevant to understanding the role of the founder) is that its leadership is invested in the person of a “charismatic” individual. That assumption ties cults to Max Weber’s classic discussion of charismatic leaders.

Weber, in an oft quoted passage, defined charisma as “. . . a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which [s/]he is set apart from ordinary [people] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.”¹

Charismatic religious leaders may appear in the center of culture; for example, Methodist evangelist/healer Oral Roberts is a prominent example of an American Christian charismatic leader. However, founders of new religions have been especially singled out as examples

of charismatic leaders since they often not only possess some marked natural ability in either leadership, teaching, or speaking, but also have followers who ascribe to them special "supernatural" or "paranormal" powers.² The nature of such special powers varies enormously. Some leaders might be seen as incarnations of the divine, such as the average Hindu guru to whom may be given any one of a set of divine titles such as avatar, bhagwan, or lord. Some might be seen as being in special contact with the supernatural realms such as a spiritualist medium, a Wiccan priestess, or the bearer of a new revelation (for example, the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. or Mary Baker Eddy). Others might be viewed as the channel for a spiritual or psychic power. Most, however, seem to be "charismatic" only in a weaker sense of having been discoverers of new truth or insight as a result of their hard work and/or specialized research. Most founders who have been labeled "cult" leaders, but who have actually founded new Christian sects, fall into this latter category: Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of the Way International; Charles Taze Russell, founder of what today is called the Jehovah's Witnesses; and Herbert W. Armstrong of the Worldwide Church of God.

Among the most influential attempts to bring together Weber's insights about charismatic leaders and the concept of cult was made by J. Milton Yinger in his important 1957 textbook, *Religion, Society and the Individual*. Concluding his oft discussed typology of religious groups is a lengthy paragraph discussing "The Cult." He says,

The term cult is used in many different ways, usually with the connotations of small size, search for a mystical experience, lack of an organizational structure, and presence of a charismatic leader. Some of these criteria (mysticism, for example) emphasize cultural characteristics that are inappropriate in our classification scheme; yet there seems to be the need for a term that will describe groups that are similar to sects, but represent a sharper break, in religious terms, from the dominant religious tradition of a society. By a cult, therefore, we will mean a group that is at the farthest extreme from the "universal church" with which we started. It is small, short-lived, often local, frequently built around a dominant leader (as compared with the greater tendency toward widespread lay participation in the sect). Both because its beliefs and rites deviate quite widely from those that are traditional in a society (there is less of a tendency to appeal to "primitive Christianity," for example) and because the problems of succession following the death of a charismatic leader are often difficult, the cult tends to be small, to break up easily, and is relatively unlikely to develop into an established sect or a denomination. The cult is concerned almost wholly with problems of the individual, with little regard for questions of social order; the implications for anarchy

are even stronger than in the case of the sect, which is led by its interest in "right behavior" (whether the avoidance of individual sin or the establishment of social justice) back to the problem of social integration. The cults are religious "mutants," extreme variations on the dominant themes by means of which men try to solve their problems. Pure type cults are not common in Western society; most groups that might be called cults are fairly close to the sect type. Perhaps the best examples are the various Spiritualist groups and some of the "Moslem" groups among American Negroes.³

This paragraph lists the essential characteristics of a cult, as social scientists understood them in the 1960s. Most importantly, a cult makes a sharp break religiously from the mainstream of any given culture's religious life. It is small, short-lived, and built around a dominant charismatic leader. Yinger suggests both by the brevity and placement of his discussion of cults that they are ephemeral and hence less than serious religious phenomena. They do not share the full religious life of a church or even a sect, but are instead built around the drama of life with the leader. While the leader lives, the group lives for the leader and follows his/her direction. When the leader dies, the group will probably die, since its life was dependent upon his/her presence.⁴

In the 1970s, of course, this sociological definition of a cult was turned against the new religions by anticultists who tried to characterize the new religions as something different from genuine religion. They said the new religions were led by charismatic leaders who were devoid of spiritual motives and whose actual agenda was the accumulation of power, money, and fame through the manipulation of duped followers who gave their leader their blind allegiance.

Yinger's definition of "cult" was challenged in the 1960s by the work of various researchers, most definitively by Geoffrey Nelson, whose work on British Spiritualism⁵ demonstrated that cults can be quite large and very long-lived (Spiritualism was over a century old at that point and showed no signs of dying). More recently Stark and Bainbridge⁶ have been able to summarize the findings of new religious movement scholars and note that the essential distinction of cults is their radical religious break with the dominant culture. In the generation between Yinger and Stark/Bainbridge, sociologists were somewhat confused and confusing in their writings about cults. They were seeking to establish a typology of religious groups that ignored the important theological-ideological dimension that most precisely defines the nature of "cult." That is to say, a cult is a religious body with a distinctive religious pattern. It does more than simply vary somewhat more from dominant religious patterns than do sects. It offers a completely different religious gestalt.⁷

The work of Nelson, Stark and Bainbridge, and the host of recent scholars of new religions has called into question the collection of ideas that reduced new religions to ephemeral marginal groups finding their total life in the extraordinary career of a charismatic leader. Increasingly, new religions are being seen in more mundane terms as a vital part of the total spectrum of diverse religious offerings in a pluralistic society. While different, at times radically different, from mainstream groups, new religions offer followers a full religious vision and a serious religious program. In spite of the changing understanding of new religions, however, the assumption that there are usually serious succession problems following the death of the founder as something of special significance has been separated from the ongoing discussion and has survived as an independent remnant of the earlier definition of "cult." While only rarely mentioned in print, that assumption is frequently dropped in conversations on new religions as assumed truth.⁸

It will not be the task of this essay to review the lengthy and continuing process of the changing assessment of new religions, a process in which this volume participates. Rather, what follows will be an attempt to summarize a perspective on cults and cult leaders and then speak to the issue of what happens to the followers when their prophet dies. The chapters on the demise and aftermath of various new religions serve as fitting examples of the range of responses of first generation religions to the loss of their founders.

Toward an International Perspective on New Religions

Much of the literature on new religions (especially the sociological material) has treated them primarily as a strange new phenomenon that has suddenly emerged in a fresh context and hence is in need of analysis. For example, the famous Glock/Bellah study in the 1970s focused upon centers of the new religions whose presence they had discovered in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s.⁹ From the series of case studies, supplemented with some broad surveys, this most significant work attempted to draw conclusions about the larger religious context of the community and other similar American communities in which they were appearing. However, the analysis offered began with the assumption that it was the presence of the new religions that needed explanation, rather than, for example, that it was the absence of new religions in earlier decades that was the odd phenomenon. The research then was directed to speculation about (1) the nature of the American cultural context (the changes in the 1960s) that seemed to have opened

the country to hosting such exotic new religions, and (2) the sociological and psychological predisposition of those people who deviated from their normal course in life to convert. However helpful such analysis may be, without additional probing of the historical and legal background of the Bay Area new religions, and without some understanding of the larger international movement of people and ideas in which these new religions were participating, the impression was often created that the new religions were nothing more than a more or less interesting product of the social upheavals of the 1960s. This impression was reinforced by the rather slow growth experienced by the new religions relative to the total population and older churches.

As new groups have emerged in the last half of the twentieth century, examination of them on the local level presents a picture of numerous, small, barely stable centers, many struggling to keep a minimum critical mass in membership and attendance, and others coming and going. As a group, the new religions have shown themselves no meaningful threat to take over the religious life in the West or any part thereof. On the other hand, the groups have permeated the culture geographically. If one moves from the Bay Area to Los Angeles, the same groups appear, and in like measure, the same or very similar groups show up in Denver and Chicago and New York and Miami. Moreover, the same groups can be found in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. And, equally importantly, the same story is also true in city after city in Europe. Be it London, Geneva, or Copenhagen, the very same array of groups appears. What happened in Berkeley in the 1970s also happened in every major urban center in the West, and Berkeley was by no means the most extreme example.

But if we begin an examination of new religions in Berkeley with some broad understanding of the emergence of new religions all over the West, where might it lead us? Let us, for example, launch a probe from the Berkeley center of the Unification Church or the Hare Krishna temple or the Church of Scientology or the local Soka Gakkai center. Regardless of their local strength, we would quickly discover that the local group is in fellowship with other similar local centers around the country. These centers are associated in a more or less hierarchical organization with a national headquarters and auxiliary national offices. In addition, each group is affiliated with local centers in other countries, each of the four mentioned above having centers in a majority of the world's countries. These additional centers are associated under the direction of an international headquarters. In the case of the Unification Church that international direction comes from Seoul, Korea, and New York. The Hare Krishna Movement is under the direction of an

international governing council that operates through a number of regional centers that have responsibility for various parts of the world. The Church of Scientology International is centered in Los Angeles. The Soka Gakkai International is directed out of Tokyo.

In light of the international headquarters office, the little centers in Berkeley, Chicago, or London take on a completely different character. They now appear as end points of a vast international missionary network. From Los Angeles, the Church of Scientology has developed centers across North America, in most countries of Europe, and to a lesser extent around the world. From Tokyo, Soka Gakkai International missionaries spread the teaching of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism to all parts of the world. From its several regional centers, the Hare Krishna Movement has reached into over one hundred countries. From Korea, the Unification church is now established worldwide on every continent. And what has been said about these four movements can be repeated for hundreds of others. Thus what we see locally as the opening of a new religious center in our town is, when viewed globally, but one more step in the spread of a vast worldwide movement and the further diffusion of its teachings and practices internationally.

Further, while new religions may seem to be a strange and different innovation, only rarely are they actually that. The overwhelming majority of the "new" religions are variations of an old religious tradition that somewhere in the world, usually in the country of origin, is part of the mainstream. Thus the Hare Krishna Movement is part of the larger Chaitanya Movement in Bengal, and in India it is honored as very much a part of the majority culture. Soka Gakkai is one of a hundred sects of Buddhism, the largest religious grouping in Japan. The Unification Church perspective synthesizes insights from the three major religious traditions of Korea—Christianity, Buddhism, and ancient shamanism. Scientology, one of the few "new" innovative religions, nevertheless draws major elements of its teachings from Buddhism, the occult, and traditional psychology.

The majority of the new centers of the "new" religions currently functioning in the urban areas throughout the West are usually outposts of large religious organizations that are many decades, if not centuries, old. And most of the remaining groups are schisms from these older groups. The old Asian religions are now in the process of spreading throughout the world from a home base in Asia or the Middle East, just as Christianity has spread from the West into the rest of the world during the last century and a half. This process of spreading began in the late nineteenth century, but was markedly increased following World

War II, primarily due to improved commercial transportation and legal changes in Japan (religious freedom), India (independence), and the United States (removal of immigration restrictions in 1965). The spread of new religions can thus be seen as a by-product of the vast human population shifts that have changed the demographics of most of the world's countries. And in encountering a local center of the new religions, westerners are confronted, as a whole, not so much by new revelations and immature theology as by very sophisticated, time-tested religious phenomena, however different and strange they might seem.

Meanwhile, adding to the intensity of the changes being experienced in the encounter with the new religions from Asia are the several new innovations in religious life that emerged in the West. In the nineteenth century, the distinctly new religious traditions of the Latter Day Saints, Spiritualism, Christian Science, New Thought metaphysics, and Theosophy appeared to challenge Christianity's exclusive hegemony over the religious experience of Western culture. During its first generation, though maligned and held up to ridicule, each offered an attractive and sophisticated religious vision and spread across the continent and to Europe. During its first generation, each grew into a stable organization, and each became, however unwillingly, the ground upon which variations could emerge. Over the decades of the twentieth century, the five new religions of the nineteenth century became five new families of religious organizations. As of 1990, there are over fifty Mormon churches, over thirty metaphysical denominations, over one hundred Spiritualist organizations, and over one hundred separate groups that can be traced directly to the Theosophical Society (though few bear that name). In the postwar period of religious mobility, aside from the older Asian and Western traditions, these new nineteenth-century religions are now spreading into new territory. Seicho-No-Ie, one of the largest of the "new" religions of Japan, developed out of the Church of Religious Science, an American metaphysical denomination. Theosophy gave birth to the New Age Movement that is now present, in strength, in such far away places as Australia and South Africa.

And the new American groups have been bolstered by the emergence of new European traditions. For example, in England, Neo-Pagan Wicca emerged soon after World War II and began what has been a spectacularly rapid diffusion in the 1960s. Within one generation it has spread throughout Europe and North America and through the avenues offered by the British Commonwealth to distant parts of the earth. In like manner, Rosicrucianism emerged in Germany several centuries ago. It has spread worldwide, with no fewer than nine different Rosicrucian groups operating in North America.

This seemingly lengthy digression into the nature of the new religions has direct implications for our understanding of the role of leaders and the effect their deaths might have on their movements. The leader/founder of the average group to which reference is made when speaking of new religions is (or was) more than likely the leader/founder of a vast international organization that has developed an appropriate bureaucracy and organization that has in turn adapted to the numerous differing legal restraints in the many countries in which it has begun missions. In the process many hundreds, if not thousands, of people have found in the particular group enough spiritual depth to devote their lives to the spread of ideas and practices while many tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, have found enough spiritual depth to adhere to the movement.

In simple terms, the average founder of a new religion, especially one that shows some success during the first generation, is obviously an important factor in the growth and development of his/her movement. The movement is initially an extension of the founder's ideas, dreams, and emotional makeup. The leader may be valued as a teacher and/or venerated as a cosmic being or even divine entity. However, once the founder articulates the group's teachings and practices, they exist independently of him/her and can and do develop a life of their own. Once the follower experiences the truth of the religion, that experience also exists independently. Once a single spokesperson for the founder arises, the possibility of transmitting the truth of the religion independently of the founder has been posited. If a leader has developed a religious vision with the depth to gain a significant following during his/her lifetime, it will be a religion in which the role of the individual who created the religion, however important, will be but one element, not the overwhelming reality. Just as the disconfirmation of a prophecy rarely alters the direction of a group,¹⁰ so the death of the founder rarely proves fatal or leads to drastic alteration in the group's life. But what does happen when the founder dies? Generally the same thing that happens in other types of organizations, that is, very simply, power passes to new leadership with more or less smoothness depending upon the extent and thoroughness of the preparation that has been made ahead of time.

Consider, for example, two very different groups. Siddha Yoga Dham (see chapter 11) had been built into an international organization by its founder, Swami Muktananda. Prior to the time of his death in 1982, he formally installed his successors and introduced them to the movement. After his death a short time later, a smooth transition of power followed, though it was disturbed by a scandal involving charges

of Muktananda's illicit sexual encounters. The new leaders worked well together for a few years; then one stepped down (or was pushed aside, depending upon which story is believed), and Swami Chidvilasananda became the sole head of the vast empire. Swami Nityananda went on to found a rival organization, but once the break was made, he took too few followers to essentially disturb the life of the Siddha Yoga Dham.

In sharp contrast was Psychiana, founded in 1929 by Frank B. Robinson. Robinson ran Psychiana out of his office in Moscow, Idaho. He wrote all of the materials, kept the mail order organization at a size he could control, and made little provision for a successor. At one time he began to form groups, out of which a new generation of leadership could have emerged, but he soon disbanded them. There being no one in place to assume his duties, the organization died with him in 1948. Psychiana is exceptional, and other examples of such nonconventional groups that died as a result of their founder's death are extremely hard to discover.

One of these rare examples is provided by the Spirit Fruit Society (see chapter 8). A relatively small community, still in the first years of life, it was traumatized by the death of its leader who was taken suddenly and unexpectedly. Only three years after the society found some stability in a permanent home in Ingleside, Illinois, founder Jacob Beilhart was stricken with appendicitis from which he died five days later. He had not had time to build the group to a critical mass and the society ceased to grow. It remained in existence for several decades but Beilhart's death essentially sealed its fate. Had he had more time with his followers, even his sudden death might not have proved fatal, as the survival of the Mormons after Joseph Smith's assassination demonstrates.

In the long run, the Spirit Fruit Society is illustrative of the many new religions that come and go having never found enough response to gain a stable life or following. When a new religion dies, it usually has nothing to do with the demise of the founder; it is from lack of response of the public to the founder's ideas or the incompetence of the founder in organizing the followers into a strong group. Most new religions will die in the first decade, if they are going to die.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, however, if a new religion finds some response and survives its initial phases of organization to attain a relative stability (the more so if it becomes fairly successful, with multiple centers and a mature leadership), the death of the founder will be experienced as a sad event but not a fatal or even traumatic one. In years past, the passing of a founder has often led to a power struggle, with the loser breaking away and taking some supporters to establish

a rival organization. Such power struggles are a clear sign that leadership was allowed to develop in the group, though the final choice among several possible successors was postponed until after the founder's death.

Such power struggles, while momentarily important, are no more significant than any other issues that threaten schism. The more preparation is made for a smooth transition, the more likely an orderly succession is to occur. We have seen such orderly transfers of power following the deaths of a number of founders who passed away in recent years: L. Ron Hubbard (Scientology), Victor Paul Wierwille (the Way), and Herbert W. Armstrong (Worldwide Church of God), not to mention the earlier examples of Mary Baker Eddy (see chapter 7), Charles Fillmore (Unity School of Christianity), Ernest Holmes (Religious Science), Baha'u'llah (the Baha'i Faith), and the founders of the several hundred other nonconventional religions whose founders have died and whose organizations continue to this day.

One important factor that has served to further lessen the impact of succession problems on new religions is the control of property. In past years, the single leader of a group could have complete control of the group's assets. If no clear successor was named, the property was the bounty to be won by rivals. However, that concern has increasingly become a nonissue, as movements in the United States (and many other countries) have moved to develop corporate structures. In the United States, almost all new religions are organized as corporations under the leadership of boards of directors who have formal legal control of the corporate assets. Generally, the corporate constitution and bylaws include specific provisions to cover the death (or removal from office by other means) of a leader and the method of his/her replacement. Given the collective nature of the board leadership, it is not subject to the disturbances caused by the death of any single person, including a founder, in a leadership position. Imposed for tax purposes, the corporate structure has as a by-product given new religious groups an additional stability that no single leader could bequeath.

In Conclusion

As we rid ourselves of the myths about new religions, we lose our naivete about their seriousness and the fullness of their religious life. We also can discard the inappropriate list of superlatives frequently used to describe new religions as totalistic societies under the absolute control of their charismatic leaders. Such talk is more rhetoric than reality

and more polemic than analysis. While we observe the adulation of religious leaders in ritual setting, we also experience the ability of members to distance themselves emotionally when away from the presence of the guru. As the myths drop away, we become free to explore the rich storehouse of data available to us in the experience and operation of first-generation religion. Normal, creative people form new religious structures, and the continued generation of new religions is to be expected as a sign of health in any open society.

New religions as first-generation religions, whether a new orthodox Christian movement such as eighteenth-century Methodism or a new Hindu group built around a recently arrived guru, share many characteristics. During the first generation, the founder, whose new ideas led to the formation of the group, places a definitive stamp upon it. The first members are self-selected because of their initial confidence in the leader and/or their agreement with the leader's program. The first generation is also a time of experimentation and rapid change. The leader must discover the right elements to combine in a workable program, generate solutions to unexpected obstacles, choose and train capable leaders, and elaborate upon the initial ideas or vision that motivated the founding of the group in order to create a more complete theology. The group formally or informally gives feedback in the form of approval or disapproval of the leader's actions. The most successful leaders are continually adjusting and reacting to that feedback.

Over time, the choices open to the leader are narrowed. Structures (and expectations) develop. As the movement grows, and especially as branches are established, the leader has to work through intermediaries, and the lines of authority and communication become more impersonal. The leader's real ability to change structures, should s/he desire such adjustments, meets greater and greater resistance. Though the leader may retain some important pieces of control, the real task of managing the organization and administering the organization's affairs increasingly passes to the second and third echelon leadership. The analogy between religious and secular corporations, however much it offends religious sensibilities, is both appropriate to and informative of religious group dynamics.

Just as different religious groups will believe and act differently when their founders are alive, different groups will bring all of their unique experiences as new religions to bear in their responses to the leaders' deaths and to filling the vacuums created by those losses. Rather than anticipate the many ways they have of dealing with their founders' deaths, I will leave that task to the essays below. This essay has a much more modest task, merely pointing out that the problem of succession

is not the determinative trauma it has often been considered to be and that it in no way cuts off options limiting the group's determination of its own future course. Groups will tend to react to their leaders' deaths as they have previously reacted to other situations, and will make the necessary decisions in much the same way they have made decisions in the past.

Starting from this new assumption, the essays below can be seen as providing a fresh opening upon an old problem as the authors initiate an exploration of what really happened when the prophet died, and what can it teach us about religion in general and new religions in particular.