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JINS 375: Weird Science

May 3, 2018

### **New Religious Movements and Violence**

On March 20, 1995, five members of the new religious movement Aleph, formerly known as AUM Shinrikyo, entered the subway system in Tokyo, each with a bag of toxic nerve gas called sarin (Pletcher, 2018). As the attackers dropped their bags releasing this gas throughout the subway, the train continued on toward the center of the city spreading the gas at each stop. In the end, the terrorist attack resulted in the death of 13 people and injured over 5000 people. Following this type of terrorist acts, many people have criticized new religious movements focusing on just the negative aspects of such movements. This backlash was so substantial that the word “cult” nowadays carry a significantly negative connotation (Abbott, 2014). However, a clear definition of what constitutes a “new” religious movement is unclear and much too general. Scientology, Raëlism, Mormonism, and smaller religious movements like Aleph are all considered to be new religious movements although they have distinct beliefs and practices. To criticize all new religious movements based on specific incidences like the Tokyo subway attack of 1995 is a hasty generalization. I argue that new religious movements deserve the same treatment as the more traditional, major religions in the world, and if particular religious practices are deemed harmful, they should be regulated regardless of whether the religion is considered a new religious movement or not.

To begin with, new religious movements are not the only religious movements that have exhibited specific incidences of harm. The Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda has led several

terrorist attacks against the United States including the well-known 9/11 attacks, one of the most disastrous, large-scale acts of terrorism in the history of mankind that killed almost 3000 people in a single day (Taylor, 2011). In more recent years, the Islamic State (IS) has conducted or triggered more than 140 terrorist attacks around the world killing a total of more than 2000 people since its declaration in 2014 (Lister, 2018). Although al-Qaeda and IS are both extremist groups, Islam is one of the most popular and well-established religions in the world. In fact, these extremist groups' global impact can be attributed to Islam's large follower population around the globe. Even for an extremist group, it is much easier to gain followers internationally if the group can be identified as part of a larger, world-wide religion as opposed to a local, new religious movement. As a comparison, Aep'h's terrorist attacks were contained within Tokyo and soon put under control whereas IS's terrorist activities are still ongoing on a global scale today and not under control by any means. Moreover, Islam is not the only traditional religion that has induced harm in the past either. Christianity, Hinduism, and many other religions around the world have at one point condoned or even encouraged violence. Christianity had many episodes of violence in history including the Crusades and many wars fought over religion (Ioffe, 2016), and even Hinduism, stereotypically viewed as the religion of peace, has exhibited several instances of violence justified through the religion (BBC, 2005). Thus, new religious movements should not be the only religions being criticized for incidences of religious violence.

However, some people argue that new religious movements should especially be criticized as they more often involve members being brainwashed by a charismatic leader to spend unhealthy amounts of time performing religious activities, a situation that allows one person, the leader, to make authoritative decisions to coordinate acts of violence (Ryan, 2000). For example, one of the most extreme cases of religious violence caused by new religious

movements was the Jonestown Massacre of 1978. Under the command of charismatic leader Jim Jones, more than 900 people who submitted themselves to the People's Temple were killed by cyanide poisoning in a so-called "revolutionary suicide" (ADST, 2017). Jones was not only successful in convincing hundreds of adults to kill themselves by taking cyanide, but also convinced parents and nurses to murder over 200 children of the religion, one of the most severe cases of large-scale brainwashing. Luring people into the religion by advocating racial equality and a united, peaceful world, Jones led his members to believe that he was god-like by exhibiting staged psychic powers and healing abilities (McCloy, 2014). Once he had established himself as of a higher power and his commands as absolute, Jones claimed that the act of violence would be a revolutionary protest against the inhumanity of this world, persuading hundreds of members to take part in the mass suicide. Critics of new religions point to these dangers of religious dictatorships in new religious movements to advocate the regulation of new religious movements in general.

Despite these risks of violence attributed to new religious movements, the regulation of all of these movements in general would be challenging and unnecessary. First, the criterion for determining whether a religion is a new religious movement or not is neither clear-cut nor universal. For example, Mormonism was a radically new religious movement when it was founded in the United States in 1830, but since then, it has become a rather well-established religion with approximately 250,000 members recorded in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Melton, 2017). In addition, other than cases of violent conflict towards the beginning of its establishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mormonism has not shown any acts of deliberate violence in its history. Thus, attempts to regulate a popular new religious movement which has not shown any signs of violent behavior are likely to be ineffective in preventing future violence and may even cause

unnecessary conflict. Furthermore, the notion of new religious movements or “cults” is not common internationally. For example, a direct translation of the word “cult” does not exist in the Japanese language, and thus, religions in Japan are not labeled based on their size or how radically new or unorthodox they are. Although the Japanese government identifies a list of “dangerous religions” which includes Aleph alongside other religions which have exhibited violent behavior (Melton, 2017), new religious movements in general are not viewed negatively as they are in the United States. So, even if we were able to legally control the activities of new religious movements in the United States, that would not limit new religious movements to establish and develop in other countries. Thus, the regulation of all new religious movements around the world is not only extremely challenging, but ineffective in reducing religious violence in general.

Therefore, rather than focusing our attention on what religions are considered new religious movements and attempting to regulate those, we should monitor religious practices which foreshadow potential harm to society regardless of what religions they belong to. Although critics of new religious movements point to specific historic incidences of violence caused by them, more well-established religions have also performed religious acts of violence. Moreover, the regulation of all new religious movements based on a few specific examples of violence is a hasty generalization, since not all new religious movements conduct religious violence. We should set a global standard on what should be considered potentially harmful religious behavior and make an international effort to regulate dangerous religious groups worldwide. The people’s religious freedom should only be taken away if their religious views cause significant harm to other people, to themselves, or to society in general, and in no other situation should this human right be taken away from members of all religions around the world.

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