

Special Editor's Introduction: New Research on Contemporary Religion From Australia and New Zealand

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be at the helm of this special issue of *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review (ASRR)*, which has come together in a comparatively effortless fashion that is not often encountered in the academic publishing process. My thanks are due to James R. Lewis, the Editor of *ASRR*, for his invitation to edit a collection of scholarly work from Australia and New Zealand, and to Nicole Ruskell of Academic Publishing, who assisted me with the editing and production of the issue.

I am delighted that the issue contains work by scholars at all stages of the life-cycle of an academic in Religious Studies, from a commencing doctoral student, through recent doctoral graduates, to early and mid-career researchers, and professorial staff. The two anonymous referees who read all the submissions and offered helpful feedback, on topics ranging from writing style and editorial practice, to structure and argument, and finally, matters of content area and disciplinary knowledge, were an indispensable part of compiling this journal volume, and I owe them a great debt of gratitude. It remains only to comment that the brief of *ASRR* is 'alternative' religion and spirituality, a concept that has always caused me to pause, in that the obvious question that arises is 'alternative' to what posited normative, mainstream religion or spirituality? The articles in this collection are focused on contemporary religion and spirituality, and canvass topics that range from secularity, non-religion and atheism, through the new religions of Rastafarianism and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), to non-traditional or 'deviant' forms of Christianity such as the Exclusive Brethren and the Branch Davidians, to the relatively little-known and undefined esoteric 'spiritual' teachings of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Little of the material in the seven articles is 'mainstream' religion and spirituality, yet perhaps equally little is truly 'alternative'. The reader must be the ultimate arbiter.

The first article, Paul Morris' "Secularity and Spirituality in New Zealand Schools," is the only contribution from an academic working in New Zealand, and acts as a scene-setter for the issue. Morris probes questions that are significant for virtually all the modern secular nation-states with 'Christian' histories, not merely for New Zealand. Despite the range of possible models for democratic Western societies (bicameral legislatures, constitutional monarchies, presidential systems, and so on), and the types of relationships between church (perhaps religion is better, being less Christian in flavour)

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and state (established religion, total separation of church and state, partial separation of church and state, and so on), problems continue to be experienced in every model, and the vexed question of the place of religion in government-run schools is a particular, and recurrent, flashpoint. After this introduction, the second article, “The ‘Brethren Cult Controversy’: Dissecting a Contemporary Australian ‘Social Problem’” by Bernard Doherty, discusses a little-known Christian sect, the so-called ‘Exclusive Brethren’, which have had a significant impact on the political situation of Australia, particularly during the years of John Howard’s conservative government, 1996 to 2007. Despite their policy of not voting in elections, members of the Brethren paid for campaign materials that were developed in order to boost the conservative vote and to turn the general public away from the liberal social mores of the Australian Labor Party, and any other progressive party standing for government. While Paul Morris is a Professor at Victoria University of Wellington, Bernard Doherty is an early career researcher from Macquarie University.

The next contribution is by Malcolm Haddon, another early career researcher from Macquarie University. “Speaking of Krishna: Rhetoric and Revelation in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)” is a challenging account of the ways in which rhetorical status is conflated with faith-based membership in ISKCON. Haddon explains that participating in speech acts about Krishna, even in those cases where the participant-investigator does not adhere to ‘beliefs’ about the Hindu saviour, nevertheless behave as authentic devotees, and thus participated in the existent reality of being a follower of Krishna, and least in cases where speaking validates the Krishnas’ way of life. The next contribute is from the most junior scholar in the collection. Raphael Lataster has had careers in pharmacy and finance, and in December 2012 completed a Master of Arts (Research) dissertation on various ‘Jesus as myth’ theories, concluding that historical and Bayesian reasoning justified holding a sceptical attitude towards the ‘historical Jesus’. His article, “New Theologians, New Atheists, and Public Engagement,” compares the New Atheists of the early twenty-first century with the earlier group of so-called ‘New Theologians’ led by Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, and argues that both groups take the traditional atheist and Christian philosophical arguments further in terms of their engagement with both science and the broader public.

The next article in the special issue is by an early career scholar, Johanna Petsche, who wrote her doctoral thesis on the Greek-Armenian esoteric teacher George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c. 1866-1949). Her contribution, “Gurdjieff and de Hartmann’s Music For Movements,” considers the music composed by Gurdjieff in collaboration with the Russian composer Thomas de Hartmann, which was used to accompany the performance

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of the ‘sacred gymnastics’ or ‘Movements’, which were one of Gurdjieff’s three principal methods of teaching, along with the reading aloud of his writings, and the music that he composed that was not linked to the Movements. The Gurdjieff ‘Work’ is an under-researched area of contemporary spirituality, and Johanna Petsche is carving out an important reputation as one of the few academic authorities on the subject. Carole M. Cusack’s article, “The Romance of Hereditary Monarchs and Theocratic States: Ethiopia and Emperor Haile Selassie I in Rastafarianism and Tibet and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, in Western Buddhism” draws attention to certain curious similarities between Rastafarianism and Tibetan Buddhism as it is received and understood in the West, which include a Romantic fascination with hereditary monarchs who claim religious authority, and the tendency to defend anti-modern, anti-democratic political systems in which peasants labour under theocratic absolutists, if these present as precious cultural and spiritual heritages threatened with extinction. Carole Cusack is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, and this piece continues her interest in new religious movements and how they are received in the Western spiritual marketplace.

The final piece is Christopher Hartney’s review article on the scholarly and popular literature that has been published regarding the FBI’s siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas that occurred twenty years ago, and now appears to be an incidence of heavy-handed governmental intervention into the (admittedly unusual) life of a Christian sectarian group. Hartney, in “Waco in Scholarship Twenty Years On,” teases out the valuable and academically defensible studies of the Waco tragedy while critiquing the sensationalist media coverage, and points toward the importance of the twentieth anniversary of this very powerful event – along with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2011, perhaps *the* defining act of religious violence in America – in offering the possibility of new thoughts about David Koresh and his followers, and new understandings of how a compound of radical Adventists could become the focus of national law enforcement agencies, and the flashpoint for violence against little-understood forms of minority religion. It is our hope that the studies found in this special issue will provoke new thoughts and provide particular delight to all readers who are interested in the oceanic field that is the study of non-traditional religions and spiritualities.