

Children in New Religions. Edited by Susan J. Palmer and Charlotte E. Hardman. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999. ix + 254 pp. (paperback). ISBN 9780813526201.

Rich in ethnographic fieldwork, *Children in New Religions* concerns itself with the “alternative childhoods” of young people in over a dozen new religious movements (NRMs). Published in 1999, the thirteen chapters of this edited collection examine NRMs of a common provenance—those that sprung from the spiritual experimentation of the late 1960s and early 1970s and survived to welcome children in the 1980s and 1990s. Ranging from libertarian to controversially sectarian, how these relics of a bygone counterculture accommodate their offspring (and how society in turn accommodates their alternative models of family) forms the book’s essential inquiry. With case studies in North America, Continental Europe, Britain, and the subcontinent, four areas of investigation are pursued: the impact children have on NRMs; how NRMs socialise their children; what issues of religious freedom arise, and how children in NRMs construct meaning.

Chapter 1 observes how Wiccans in North America have adapted their rituals to accommodate and involve children. The author notes that second-generation neopagans are “less spiritual seekers than passive recipients” (p. 13) and whilst children are ritually celebrated in the movement, they necessarily make neopaganism more conservative with the need for restrained sexuality, continuity, and fixed behaviours. Chapter 2 gives voice to ISKCON (Hare Krishna) youths attending public schools in North America. With a breakdown in the movement’s communal structure, and children increasingly forming “non-devotee” friendships, the author concludes that ISKCON’s collective identity will ultimately lose relevance as children ironically “follow in the footsteps of their parents’ generation” and seek alternative life options (p. 45). In chapter 3, the intentional separation of children from their mothers in New York’s Sullivanian community makes for irksome reading, and places this psychotherapeutic movement at stark odds with the preponderance of NRMs that pointedly *value* family unity or indeed specifically invest children with salvific potential.

The evangelical culture of Sweden’s Word of Life movement is explored in chapter 4, and member children are observed to be both restricted in their autonomy, and encouraged to develop age-appropriate, “spiritually anointed language” (p. 86). Greater ideological freedoms are afforded to sannyasin children at the successful, Rajneesh-inspired Osho Ho Ksuan School in England (chapter 5), though formalising their education is seen to illustrate one of the “problems inherent in any libertarian movement that outgrows the size and informality of its charismatic origins” (p. 119). Likewise, Shri Mataji’s “ideal model” of a detached childhood is challenged by the socialisation practices at the Sahaja Yoga school

in India (chapter 6). Chapter 7 uses Rodney Stark's methodology to evaluate the relative 'success' of the charismatic group ISOT, where children are socialised to make a moral commitment to their religion, whilst in the utopian Damanhur movement (chapter 8), children are socialised through interaction with adults in an alternative socioreligious family.

Chapters 9 to 12 comprise a critique of society's desire to control the "disordered space" of NRMs. With the decline of brainwashing theory, allegations of child abuse have become the prominent weapon of the anticult movement, and ugly custody disputes demonstrate the ethical difficulty in balancing the best interests of children with their parents' right to religious freedom. In the final chapter, Charlotte E. Hardman speaks with young members of Transcendental Meditation, Findhorn, and The Family, and debates whether children are active participants in the construction of their own social lives, or whether they are merely templates onto which external socialising agents exert their influence.

Children in New Religions was published nearly two decades ago. Without detracting from the value of the book, it is important to acknowledge the contemporary limitations of its 1980s and 1990s fieldwork. Firstly, it largely pre-dates the digital revolution and the ubiquitous accessibility of the internet—the cultural impact of which was unappreciable at the time of the book's publication. Certain observations 'date' the research: chapter 4 observes children in the Word of Life participating in religious instruction via a "cassette club" (p. 80) and in chapter 8, the author reports that members of Damanhur enjoy a higher than average level of computer ownership at "one every six citizens" (p. 141). Whilst some of the NRMs (such as the Twelve Tribes) have traditionally shunned technology, others—such as Wiccans/neopagans—have enthusiastically embraced it. From a present-day position, it is easy to patronise Helen A. Berger's 1994 citation of a "Pagan on the Internet" (p. 24) as 'quaint,' but in truth her observation shrewdly adumbrates the extent to which cyberspace would quickly become a platform through which modern Pagan youth might experience their own religion (and, conversely, be exposed to external influences). For further reading, see Douglas E. Cowan's *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (2005) or Stef Aupers's chapter on magic and technology in Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman's edited volume, *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (2010).

Secondly—and perhaps more significantly—most of the "second-generation" NRM children observed and interviewed by the book's field researchers would by now have procreated a third (or even fourth) generation, inviting further opportunities for follow-up ethnographies. Just as the editors characterise NRM children as "gaz[ing] with curiosity at the surrounding society that it was never their choice to reject" (p. 1), readers will find themselves wondering, 'What happened to those children?' With many of the NRMs' founders now deceased (Rajneesh/Osho, Saul Newton, David Brant Berg, Oberto Airaudi, Shri Mataji)

and some of the movements now defunct (Sullivanians/Fourth Wall) or much downsized (ISOT), a follow-up study would also offer a means to test Hardman's closing hypothesis—that the success or failure of an NRM depends largely on the degree to which the movement's children can be successfully socialised into the worldview of their parents (p. 240).

Despite its limitations (which are owed only to the passing of time), I found *Children in New Religions* to be a thoroughly engaging read. Its fieldworkers are rigorous in their evaluations but approach their subjects with a low index of suspicion, casting an objective gaze onto a topic so often mischaracterised by the louder voices of alarmists, apostates, and anticultists. I commend this book as worthy material for students and scholars of new religious movements, and for anyone interested in the uneasy intersection of religious freedom and the wellbeing of children.

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