
Book Review

HEALY, J. P. 2010. *Yearning to Belong: Discovering a New Religious Movement*. Farnham: Ashgate. vii + 207pp. ISBN 978 1 40941 941 9. Hbk. £50.00.

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John Healy's book is a welcome addition to the literature on western devotees of Hindu-derived meditation movements, which now form an important aspect of the religious landscape of most western countries. Healy uses the example of Siddha Yoga, founded by the Hindu guru Muktananda, as a case study to explore why non-Hindus are attracted to what he terms "Guru-disciple Yoga Practice." While I am not particularly enamoured with this term, it does signify one of the most bewildering aspects of these groups for outsiders, namely why non-Hindus are willing to accept the religious authority of an Indian guru. In addition the title of this book is rather misleading, as it makes no reference to Siddha Yoga.

Healy identifies Guru-disciple Yoga Practice as a type of New Religious Movement (NRM). He also clearly states that his agenda is to contest the simplistic notion that joining these groups, which are sometimes labelled as cults by the media, must involve "brainwashing." While the brainwashing thesis is largely discredited in the academic study of NRMs, the empirical evidence in Healy's case study strengthens the argument. He also hopes that his study will inform the caring professions, which he suggests still largely accept the brainwashing thesis.

This is not a history of Siddha Yoga, nor a detailed exposition of its teaching, but an account of what Healy aptly calls the trajectory of individual involvement with the group. Healy interviewed 32 former members of Siddha Yoga, whom he identified through snowball sampling. Healy also undertook fieldwork by joining and observing *satsangs*, which are meetings of members for group chanting and meditation. Critics could suggest that Healy's research is methodologically flawed on a number of levels. First, snowball sampling leads to a self-selecting group, which is not representative. Second, his study was based in Australia, and therefore his findings might not be applicable to the European or North American context. Third, there is the question whether or not one can extrapolate the research findings about Siddha Yoga to making more general claims about either Guru-disciple Yoga Practice or NRMs. I think that these criticisms would be unjustified as Healy's work adds to a growing body of empirical research on similar groups, and therefore cannot be taken in isolation.

The first part of the book sets the context for the actual research into individual involvement in Siddha Yoga. While Chapter Two gives a useful introduction to the history and practices of Siddha Yoga, the rest of this section is less successful. Chapters Three and Four provide what is little more than a literature review of sociological studies of NRMs, conversion, the brainwashing thesis and so on. While some of this material will be useful revision for

undergraduates, this material should be more than familiar to more experienced academics. Chapter Five discusses the methodological issues, and while it does provide some useful information that contextualizes the study and indicates that the author is very aware of some of the methodological problems, it is too long. Overall, I felt that there was too much in the way of contextual material, which could have been judiciously edited. However, the remainder of the book, in which Healy gives an account of the various trajectories of involvement, is much more rewarding.

Healy begins his account of individual involvement with a discussion of what attracts people to Siddha Yoga in the first instance. Healy utilizes the term “discovery” to indicate the nature of getting involved. He utilizes the term in order to indicate that joining involves individual agency, is not an instantaneous “Paul on the Road to Damascus” type of conversion, and that joining is not necessarily induced by a life crisis. The term “discovery” is apt as Healy observes that individuals who join “feel that they have both discovered themselves (or their inner self) and become part of a community” (p. 85).

Healy then discusses the different levels of involvement with, experiences and impacts of being a member of Siddha Yoga. As many of his informants were members of Siddha Yoga in the very early days of the movement, he also utilizes this discussion to indicate some of the issues that pertain to the trajectory of development of Siddha Yoga as an institution. For example, Healy astutely observes that Siddha Yoga “developed out of an interchange between what devotees initially discovered in Muktunanda and his India Ashram, and how they began to interpret and share this discovery” (p. 95). He also emphasizes that the experience and degree of involvement with the movement is in fact extremely varied.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book, and the one that provides the most effective argument against the anti-cult movement, is the section where Healy writes about disengagement from and life after leaving Siddha Yoga. Healy refers to leaving the movement as “moving away,” thereby emphasizing the fact that exit is a process and not a one-off event. The conceptualization of leaving a NRM in terms of moving away also acknowledges individual agency and negates the argument of the anti-cult lobby that outside intervention is necessary to rescue passive victims. He also suggests that the nature of involvement has an impact on how easily participants were able to adjust to life after Siddha Yoga. Healy makes the obvious, but often neglected point that there is a direct relationship between level and amount of time involved in a group and the ease of adjusting to life after leaving. However, this is no different to leaving any other institutional environment.

There is much to recommend in Healy’s book, particularly in the last two thirds, which make a major contribution to empirical studies of non-traditional religions in the West. Healy effectively problematizes simplistic discourses about Svengali cult leaders and brainwashed followers through his case study of Siddha Yoga.