Book Review


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Those of us in the field of new religious movement (NRM) studies have been anticipating the publication of W. Michael Ashcraft’s A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements for years. It is a history of the field of NRM studies itself, and over the past decade Ashcraft has been collecting stories and formal interviews from scholars in the field about their experiences as scholars and their personal intellectual autobiographies. (As a point of disclosure, Ashcraft has interviewed me, and I am briefly mentioned in the book, alongside nearly every other scholar involved in the study of NRMs.) The book’s publication therefore represents an important culmination in the development of the field of the study of new and alternative religions.

Scholars invested in the role of fieldwork in religious studies will find the book to be an important contribution for two reasons. First, one of the more important stories told in Ashcraft’s history is the slow growth within the field of NRM studies of methodologies grounded in fieldwork. One cannot come away from the book without recognizing that the development of this academic specialty proceeded in tandem with NRM scholars making intentional fieldwork more central in their methodological approach. But secondly, the book represents a sort of auto-ethnographic approach to NRM studies, making the “field” of the academic study of new religious movement the “field” in which Ashcraft engaged in his own research. The book follows in the vein of works such as Sharon Traweek’s Beamtimes and Lifetimes: The World of High Energy Physicists (1992) in terms of turning the reflexive lens of the researcher back onto academia itself.

Ashcraft’s volume encompasses five chronologically organized chapters, covering the origins of NRM studies in the early and mid-twentieth century up to the full establishment and institutionalization of the field in the 1990s. It also includes three thematic chapters, on violence, gender, and fieldwork itself. The last of these chapters, “Fieldwork and NRM Studies” (Chapter 9), will most interest readers of this journal.

Yet importantly, the five historical chapters each begin by rooting the period under consideration in the scholarly engagement of a particularly representative scholar, either their formal fieldwork working with a specific NRM, or their more general experience of
contact with the members of such. This includes Douglas Cowan’s informal contact with members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), James T. Richardson and Mary Steward’s ethnography among the Jesus People, J. Stillson Judah’s fieldwork among ISKCON devotees (the Hare Krishnas), and Eileen Barker’s qualitative and quantitative studies of the Unification Church. Sarah Pike’s ethnography among pagan festivalgoers also begins the chapter on gender. Ashcraft therefore organized his book and the history it tells around the fieldwork of the field’s founders.

Ashcraft makes clear that the field of NRM studies developed in tandem with the academic norms of sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, and history of religion. Whereas early scholars of NRMs often relied on “armchair anthropology”, later generations developed their scholarship based on empirical work in the field. “Before the 1960s, fieldwork with cults or alternative religions was scarce”, Ashcraft explains (p. 215). Yet by the 1990s, it was standard. While most of his explicit discussion of this transition is confined to the chapter on fieldwork itself, Ashcraft makes clear that he envisions fieldwork as central to the development of the academic specialty. “Without it [i.e., fieldwork], NRM studies would not exist in the form it takes today”, he explains (p. 211). Ashcraft highlights how NRM scholars slowly came to embrace and engage the complicated questions of fieldwork, such as the place of reflexivity, questions of insider-outsider perspectives, and the ethics of research. Of these, my only critique is that Ashcraft might have turned more attention to the latter of these issues, and interrogated more deeply the questions of academic ethics, especially the role of deception in research, which was occasionally deployed by NRM scholars in earlier eras.

Properly speaking, this book is historiographic in orientation, a history of the history of new religious movements. Yet it can also be understood as a form of retrospective fieldwork, uncovering the history of the development and institutionalization of the academic field based on Ashcraft’s participant-observation as member of this academic specialty. Ashcraft’s focus within the chapter on fieldwork on the growth of reflexivity, the intersection of cultural worlds, and recognizing the relational nature of scholarship not only helps situate how scholars of NRMs treat their subjects, but how W. Michael Ashcraft treats his own subject, his fellow scholars. As one of these informants, a member of the strange tribal group known as the contemporary academic, it is refreshing to see the lens of scholarship turned back on us!