Editors’ Preface

Alex Norman1 and Asbjørn Dyrendal2

1University of California, Davis and Center for Mind and Brain;
2Norwegian University of Science and Technology

anorman@ucdavis.edu; asbjorn.dyrendal@hf.ntnu.no

Welcome to another issue of IJSNR, in which the authors revisit some of the classical topics of NRM-studies—with a twist: “brainwashing” and law; rational choice and punishment; pastoral (mis)behavior; religion and health.

Some of us may have thought that the concept of brainwashing died outside of conspiracy culture with the worst of the cult controversies. At the least, they might be excused for expecting that the adoption of the Daubert standard would end the influence of such dubious concepts in a court of law. Not so, argues Jenny Reichert, Jim Richardson, and Rebecca Thomas, who look at the diffusion of “brainwashing” and similar ideas in the legal arena over the past decades. Instead of disappearing, the models derived from the cult wars seem to be alive and influencing public life in cases from child custody to terrorism.

During the early 1980s Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge’s rational choice approach to theorizing religion was among the more daring. The approach has since largely been developed with regard to religious markets. In their article on “Social Control in the Children of God,” Jonathan Simmons and Stephen Kent note that the original formulations put a lot of stress on rewards and its synonyms. They want instead to expand the theory in another direction, towards the role of punishment in social control and identity formation.

Punishment is, to some extent, also a topic in Liselotte Frisk and Sue Palmer’s article on the life story of ex-pastor Helge Fossmo. Previously a Pentecostal minister in Knutby, Sweden, he is now in jail for manipulating another person into committing murder and attempted murder. The public reaction was very strong, invoking a host of cult stereotypes. Frisk and Palmer revisit...
the case, with attention to what is known about the congregation, and to Fossmo’s attempts at freeing himself from some of the culpability in their interviews with him by, in part, invoking the cult stereotypes and through the language of his prison therapist.

In contrast to models of punishment and control, the ways individuals become engaged with a movement may in some contexts be related to personal wellbeing. In observing measured changes in the wellbeing of followers of Mata Amritanandamayi—better known as Amma—Samit Pandya contests that movement deconstructs hegemonic masculinity. The resulting habitus created is, Pandya argues, entwined with social privilege and construed as the perfect solution to the pitfalls of life in contemporary India.

We hope readers find these articles of value to their own work.