

*Philosophical Explorations of New and Alternative Religious Movements*, edited by Morgan Luck. Ashgate, 2012, 177 pp., hb., £50. ISBN-13: 9781409406532.

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philosophy, new religious movements, alternative religious movements

Since their formation as a field of research, alternative and new religious movements (NRMs) have been studied by a variety of scientific fields (psychology, sociology, theology, anthropology, history) and methods (interviews, ethnographic research, participant observation, etc.). However, according to my knowledge, philosophical research has been almost absent or at least very rare. This is the first reason why this edited volume entitled *Philosophical Explorations of New and Alternative Religious Movements* manages to attract the reader's interest in the first place. The book consists of eleven brief chapters all written by academics mainly of a philosophical background. The editor, Morgan Luck, senior lecturer of Philosophy at Charles Sturt University in Australia, has written two chapters including a very illuminating introduction, where he explains the reason he proceeded in the publication of this book and the aim of this collection. The book aims to illustrate for philosophers of religion interested in NRMs and adherents of such movements what such an engagement with this field might look like; because, as he stresses, philosophers of religion, especially analytical philosophers, are not involved with NRMs and their study (5–6).

Writing a review on a collection of papers is not an easy task. As a consequence, I am going to refer to some specific chapters, especially those which made me more curious and attracted my interest. However, I could say that the first two chapters, the introductory one by the editor and the second one by George Chryssides, who is a prominent scholar in the field of NRMs, help readers to introduce themselves to this innovative approach. The other nine chapters deal with a variety of issues, like religious naturalism, new atheism, the world of faith movement, Guru disciple tradition, Scientology, Raelianism, Mormonism, digital theology and the Arica school. All these chapters are basically interested in philosophical themes like the concept of God or the supernatural and they discuss these subjects through philosophical argu-

mentation (e.g. pages 113–119 and 140–147). This is not always easy for the reader ignorant of philosophy to follow and it is sometimes annoying when the theoretical philosophical argumentation is repeated to great extent within the chapter. This does not mean that the argumentation is incorrect or illogical, quite the contrary. However, I think that this book is not targeting the general public, but to people engaged in the field and with a strong theoretical if not philosophical knowledge.

Some chapters are of more interest, the chapter on new atheism by John Bishop for example. Even though it is not the place here to go deep into such an issue that engages academics from a range of fields, I think that the writer is making an effort to fit atheism in a religious pattern, following for example the argument that Buddhism is also a non-theistic religion that is still considered a religion. Using the argument that some (scientific) naturalists could view all of nature as God or at least including supernatural elements, without accepting any kind of personified God, he tries to relate (new) atheism with religion through a combination of naturalism and theism. I suppose that at this point there is confusion between religion and the sacred. Nature could be considered as sacred but this does not lead necessarily to the formation of a religion. Furthermore, he argues that helping the others is an intrinsic part of faith and as a consequence, atheism could be included in this realm, since “Non-Believers Giving Aid” is a part of atheistic conviction (46). Even though I find myself disagreeing with such arguments, I think that this chapter is very interesting just because it poses such questions and I think that further discussion will outcome useful ideas and analyses.

The following chapter on The World of Faith Movement, by Andrew Fisher is also very interesting since it is focused on the concept of faith and makes an analysis of a group that is not very known and studied. The same applies for the last chapter on the Arica School, by Andrew J. Dell’Olio. The question here is if the Arica school could be considered as an NRM or just as a school of thought or school of philosophy and the same objection could also be posed regarding the World Faith Movement. Of course, the writers answer yes to the first question, but in my opinion additional discussion is needed if someone wishes to draw a conclusion on such issues. The next interesting chapter is that by John Paul Healy on Guru Disciple tradition where he asks if religious conversion can be non-cognitive. He examines four case studies of people involved with Siddha Yoga and how they were engaged with the movement. I think that he points out that religious conversion could be non-cognitive, even though I would say that some of the arguments exposed are in some sense sociological and not philosophical. It is well presented and

supported, but in my opinion the reasons of non-cognitive religious conversion is mainly explained via social factors, which are relatively clear in his argumentation. Equally interesting is also the chapter about Digital Theology. It deals with the virtual and the internet and even though I am not sure I agree with the characterization of Digital Theology as a social movement, I think that it is a very useful analysis about a field, which is very dynamic and evolving.

The above short presentation and critique on some of the volume's chapters does not mean in any way that all the other are not important and well written. I already mentioned the first two chapters, and especially the second one by George Chrystides, which is very illuminating for the NRMs field. The other chapters on Scientology, Raelianism, and Mormonism are equally interesting, even though I found that the chapter about Scientology could be richer in terms of theoretical analysis and bibliography. Of course, the 'unusual', the non-mainstream or even the controversial is always getting the attention of the reader, regardless of whether someone agrees with what is discussed or not. My general overview of this edited volume is that it manages to achieve its editor's aim, i.e. to make those interested in philosophy become involved with a field of research which is basically dominated by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, theologians, church officials, and lawyers. In my opinion, the book is well structured and includes the necessary stimulus for further research and analysis. This does not imply that this is a book easily accessible for graduate students or the general public, unless they have a basic philosophical background. I think that is mainly addressed to academics in the field of philosophy, and to NRM researchers, who could deal with such kind of arguments.

In addition, I could argue that the volume is not taking a clear position in favor or against religion and in that sense is very balanced, regardless of any kind of critique and this should be considered an advantage. Furthermore, and based on that, I believe that the book should find its place among the academic libraries of universities and institutions and it could encourage more in-depth research especially of the most controversial issues mentioned above. If the role of philosophy is to make unusual questions and make people reflect on what seems "normal" and "mainstream" I assume that this edited philosophical volume has accomplished its goal. In my view the book paves the way for further scrutiny by not providing solid and dogmatic answers, and this also an advantage.