Editors’ Introduction

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Welcome to issue 10.1 of the International Journal for the Study of New Religions, the first issue released under the new editorship of Dr Venetia Robertson (University of Sydney) and Dr Fredrik Gregorius (Linköping University). We also have a new book-review editor Dr Manon Hedenborg White (Södertörn University). This editorial team continues the tradition, established by journal founders Professor Carole M. Cusack and Professor Liselotte Frisk, of a collaboration between Australian and Scandinavian academics which represents the international engagement in the study of religion this journal aims to facilitate. In our inaugural issue we are proud to be publishing five articles from both established and emerging scholars from Europe, the US and the UK on different, diverse, and provocative topics.

With an ever-changing global religious milieu, the study of new, emergent, and changing religions is as urgent as ever. We find in the current issue examples of how new religious ideas and movements can not only act as case studies of broader social and cultural trends, but can also have direct political impacts. For example, with Olav Hammer’s article on Swedish Traditionalism we are not only encountering how an esoteric worldview entered a new cultural setting, but one of the primary exponents of Traditionalism, Tage Lindbom also became one of the primary ideologies for Swedish conservatism. We also see how from the other side of the political spectrum the Satanic Temple are using freedom of religion in order to challenge what they see as Christian hegemony in the political arena.

For the future of the study of contemporary religiosity, it is imperative that we see religious innovation as a world-wide, cross-cultural phenomenon. This can occur in the developments of already established traditions that are given a new form, responding to the cultural shifts of our present context. It can
be in the reification of once secular ideas and activities to a sacred level. And of course, in new religious movements, which present as novel modes of religious engagement, often direct products of a felt need to provide solutions a world considered to be in spiritual crisis. In future issues we hope to showcase more articles that deal with such developments beyond the Western arena. Nonetheless, the selection of articles that comprise our inaugural issue provide an excellent cross-section of the multidisciplinary and topically diverse study of the always fascinating area of new religion.

In our opening article, Olav Hammer, Professor of Studies in Religion from the University of Southern Denmark, takes a historical approach to the key aspects of Swedish traditionalism. Traditionalism is the perennial philosophy of an esoteric but central truth that is shared by all religions, an idea that Hammer locates in the works of the artist Ivan Aguéli, poet Kurt Almqvist, and politician Tage Lindbom. Developing the earlier ideas of Traditionalism established by René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, Aguéli, Almqvist, and Lindbom like their forebears found the mystical Islamic branch of Sufism to be their path to enlightenment. The fascinating relationship between esotericism, right-wing politics, and the sacralisation of ‘tradition’ is explored by Hammer in this study of seminal but under-studied Swedish spiritual thinkers.

The second article in this issue, by Jake Poller of the Department of English at Queen Mary, University of London, is derived from Poller’s in-depth study of the spiritual ideas encapsulated in the life of work of Aldous Huxley. Here, Poller shines a spotlight on the discourse of human potential in Huxley’s 1962 novel Island. In Island Huxley merges utopianism with concepts borrowed from the Asian traditions of Buddhism and tantra to form a philosophy of realized selfhood, a major concern in the alternative spiritual landscape of the Western world in the twentieth century. However, Poller makes the argument that despite its popularity and influence in Western esoteric circles, the deployment of Huxley’s ideas on the actualization of the self has been misled and misleading. Through a close reading of Huxley’s Island, intended to be his true legacy, Poller emphasizes the humanistic rather than mystic qualities of Huxley’s vision for harmonious existence.

Nicole Bauer’s study of the Kabbalah Centre is the third article in this issue, bringing together an assessment of the organization founded by Philip Berg as a living example of corporatized self-spirituality and theory from German scholarship. Bauer overviews the development of the Kabbalah Centre from a study-based institute looking into the mystical aspects of Judaism to the internationally renowned spiritual centre today favoured by celebrities such
as Madonna and heavily critiqued for its controversial commercial endeavours such as selling branded water with claims it could help cure cancer. Aside from the stories that have put the Kabbalah Centre in media headlines, Bauer argues that the true secret to its appeal to followers is that it offers a fully immersive ‘experience world’ or erlbenwelten, a German term borrowed from Tourism Studies.

In the fourth article, Benjamin Fischer offers a much-needed linguistic analysis of Scientological discourse. Applying the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to data collected from sources such as L. Ron Hubbard’s dictionaries of Dianetics and Scientological terms and a promotional video produced by the Church Fischer suggests that the unique vocabulary popularized by Hubbard has a significant effect on the legitimation of this controversial new religious movement. ‘Scientology-speak’, as it is often called, is shown by Fischer to evince authority and authenticity by utilising emotive language, pseudo-scientific terms, polysemous words, and euphemisms. This approach creates a lexicon that unites insiders and alienates outsiders for whom the Scientological slang in particular can seem impenetrable and nonsensical. Fischer’s study contributes a first step in what should be an avenue of investigation into the affective utilization, manipulation, and reformulation of language and meaning in minority religions.

Our book-review editor Manon Hedenborg White and our editor Fredrik Gregorius bring us the final article in this issue, an exploration of the recent political involvement of the Satanic Temple in the US. The Satanic Temple was founded around 2012-2013 and quickly gained media attention for its performative public image. The Temple is distinguished from other earlier American Satanic movements such as the Church of Satan by its left-wing agenda and from the Temple of Set by its atheism. In their analysis of the group, Hedenborg White and Gregorius situate the still-young Satanic Temple in the study of contemporary Satanisms and tie its emergence to the productive nexus of feminism, occulture, and secularism visible in the present era. As a rationalist rather than religionist occult group with an unashamedly political and provocative reputation, the Satanic Temple make an important case study for the intersections of religion, activism, and the media.

We end this issue with two reviews. Karen Swartz reviews the Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, Siv Ellen Kraft and James R. Lewis (eds) anthology New Age in Norway (2016). Swarts also presents a discussion on the problems with the term ‘New Age’ in her review. The second is from Susan J. Palmer who reviews Bernadette Rigal-Cellard’s Les Douze Tribus: La Communauté Messianique de Sus en France (2019) that deals with the often-understudied area of new religious
movements in France. Importantly, Rigal-Cellards points to the limitations for this area of study imposed by legal restrictions on new religions in France. Both reviews thus deal with case studies on how new religions relate to local and national cultures, both very secular but also very different in how new religions and spirituality is approached.

In closing we would like to extend our sincere thanks to all our dedicated authors and peer reviewers for their contributions to the journal. We also acknowledge the hard work put in to the journal by our antecedents, Dr Alex Norman and Professor Asbjørn Dyrendal who, as editors, promoted quality scholarship through this platform for several years. Finally, thanks to our new president for the International Society for the Study of New Religions, Dr George Chryssides, for his encouragement and guidance in this endeavor. We look forward to continuing the society’s tradition of fostering stimulating and productive conversations about the evolution of religion and its study in our time.