Editors’ Introduction

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This issue of the International Journal for the Study of New Religions is special, not in that it is a themed special issue, though one of that kind is forthcoming, but special because it marks a sad but meaningful occasion—the passing of one of its founders, Liselotte Frisk. Over a decade ago, Liselotte, Professor of the History of Religion at Dalarna University in Falun, Sweden, and Carole Cusack, Professor of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney, Australia, established this journal as a home for a niche area of study in the vast field of religion, yet one that continues to yield essential analysis and commentary on issues pertinent to all aspects of life. At the 2011 conference for the Centre for the Study of New Religions (CESNUR) in Taiwan, Carole and Liselotte introduced their new project at the general meeting, and our co-editor Venetia was honoured to have been in the room for this historic moment. Over the course of the Taiwan conference, and again in Falun where Liselotte hosted the annual CESNUR conference in 2013, Venetia got to know Liselotte as they discussed their shared vegetarianism, the challenges and benefits of organizing international events, and emergent areas of research in the arena of new religions.

Liselotte Frisk was central to the establishment of the study of New Religious Movements in Sweden. During the 1990s, when the public debate about new religions was still dominated by anti-cult rhetoric, Liselotte brought forward the study of new religions as a subject for serious academic research. Her 1989 PhD dissertation, Nya religiösa rörelser i Sverige. Klassifikation samt analys av anslutning, engagemang och relation till samhället/världen (Eng. “New Religious Movements in Sweden; Classification and analysis of connection,
engagement, and relationship with society/the world”), was a milestone in the development of the study of new religions in Sweden. She was also an instrumental member in the development of FINYAR (Forskning och Information om Nya religiösa Rörelser, Eng. Research and Information on New Religious Movements), and will be long-remembered for her projects on the experiences of children in NRM.

In honour of her career and character, we have reached out to a number of Liselotte’s friends and colleagues to offer their own remembrances. The resultant tribute, opened and compiled by the IJSNR co-founder Carole Cusack, includes recollections and comments shared by Liselotte’s esteemed colleagues and companions George Chryssides, Eileen Barker, Susan Palmer, Ben Zeller, Massimo Introvigne, Milda Ališauskienė, Mikael Rothstein, Sanja Nilsson, and a beautiful poem by Ted Nordquist, and speaks to Liselotte’s contribution to both her field and to the lives of those who knew her. We would like to dedicate this issue to Liselotte’s memory, and we hope that the journal continues to do so as it publishes cutting edge work on a topic that Liselotte made the centre of her own academic practice. The body of this issue offers five distinct approaches to the study of new religions.

First we have part one of a two-part study by Francesco Piraino of contemporary Sufism. In this issue his article, “Sufism Meets the New Age Discourse Part 1: A Theoretical Discussion,” traces the discursive features of the New Age to highlight their confluences with contemporary Sufi practice, organization, and development. In doing so, Piraino lays the groundwork for Part 2 of this study, wherein he applies this analytical framework to his ethnographic work with the Naqshbandiyya-Ḥaqqāniyya in Italy. Over the course of these two discussions, Piraino reinvigorates methodological discussions around “the New Age” and demonstrates the ongoing relevance on this topic in the example of the recent phenomenon of European Sufi orders.

Second in this issue is Himani Kapoor’s article, “The Guru Persona: Charisma, Authority and the Guruography,” which continues her analysis on the creation and impact of gurus and guru narratives. In particular, Kapoor makes a study of two contemporary Indian gurus with worldwide influence—Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who founded the Art of Living Foundation in 1981 and Jaggi Vasudev of the Isha Foundation, established in 1992. Of especial focus for Kapoor is the genres of the “guruography”—biographies of gurus—and devotee testimonials. These sources
form key pieces of primary evidence for the practices of constructing powerful charismatic identities and the impact such identities have on their followers.

Third we have an article that revisits some of the most infamous examples of violence in new religious movements with Leoni Connah’s study of the Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo. Her article “Violence and New Religious Movements: The Relationship Between Cognitive Dissonance and Perceived Pressure” puts the experience of pressure from both external and internal forces at the heart of the calamitous loss of life that has made these two movements an ongoing site of analysis for scholars since the 1990s. With the continued prevalence of messianism, apocalypticism, terrorism, and martyrdom in our contemporary religious landscape such case studies cannot be readily put to one side.

Fourth we have an article by James R. Lewis and Zhou Ze’en, “New Religions and Youth Movements: Overlapping But Distinct Categories” that argues for how a distinction between New Religious Movements (NRMs) and a specific category of youth movement—designated as Youth Identity Movements (YIM)—can be made. The article looks at how some YIMs later becomes NRMs as their membership ages, while other remains as YIMs and do not develop the characteristics of NRM. Looking at the categorical development of NRMs in the 1970s the article argues that it is only now with hindsight such distinctions can be made.

Finally, we have an article by Olav Hammer and Karen Swartz, “The Show Must Go On: Corporate Narratives in the Anthroposophical Society” that observes the organizational developments of Anthroposophy. As this new religious movement has becomes more stable and mature, concerns like raising money and managing a working organization become more pressing. Looking at this from a structuralist approach and using the Lithuanian literary theorist Algirdas Greimas, the authors use a specific set of texts, namely the so-called Christmas appeals in which a spokesperson for the leadership of the General Anthroposophical Society at the Goetheanum initiates a fundraising campaign, to address how the Anthroposophical Society resembles, yet transcends the bounds of, a secular organization.

In our Book Review section, this issue includes five reviews of recent scholarly works relevant to the study of new religions. Paulina Gruffman reviews Julie Chajes’s Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky’s Theosophy (Oxford University Press, 2019), while Emily McKendry-Smith reviews Ann Taves’s Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of
New Spiritual Paths (Princeton University Press, 2016). Narrative and Belief: The Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction (Routledge, 2018), edited by Markus Altena Davidsen, is the subject of a review by Nathan Fredrickson, while Jeremy Rapport has reviewed D. W. Pasulka’s American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology (Oxford University Press, 2019). Finally, Evelina Lundmark has reviewed Practical Spiritualities in a Media Age (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), edited by Curtis D. Coats and Monica M. Emerich.