Book Review


Structure-wise, this third edition consists of traditional titles, production details, contents, and five detailed chapters, namely: 1. Overview (pp. 1-60); 2. Court Decisions, Legislation and Governmental Actions (pp. 61-107); 3. Controversial Groups and Movements: An Expanded Glossary (pp. 108-76); 4. Documents and Data (pp. 177-203); 5. Organizations and Websites (pp. 204-11); plus an 1830–2011 Chronology (pp. 212-32); Bibliography (pp. 233-40); and Index (pp. 241-50). Regrettably, the Contents section is too brief. It does not list all of its very informative sub-sections, thus forcing readers to rely excessively upon the Index and/or manually trawling through its pages for desired items.

This is a shame because there are many valuable topics. Chapter 1, for example, consists of six sub-sections, all further divided: ‘New Religions East and West’, divided into ‘A. The Solar Temple’, ‘B. The anti-cult movement: a response to the anti-social actions of extreme groups’, ‘C. Falun Gong’, and ‘D. Religious libertarianism: a response to the persecution of minority religions’. The second sub-section is ‘Religious Persecution in the Nineteenth Century’, divided into ‘A. Atrocity tales’, and ‘B. Religious insanity’. The other sections cover an exploration of ‘brainwashing’, stereotypes and public perceptions, the appeal and dangers of new religions, and the final section, ‘New Religions, Violence, and Suicide’, divided into ‘A. Millennialism’, ‘B. External provocation and social isolation’, and ‘C. Di Mambro, Jones, and Applewhite’. The other chapters are similarly subdivided, thus leaving one puzzled as to why these subdivisions were not listed given their obvious value to the researcher, marketing appeal, and especially since the previous edition did so. What was gained by eliminating them in this edition?

Construction-wise, the book is a hybrid of dictionary, guide, and reference with a historical slant, but which regrettably appears cobbled together from Lewis’s previous publications transplanted herein, but with a serious lack of contemporary (c. 2012) references. The bibliography does not contain anything older than 2004 and most
references are pre-2000 vintage; similarly, many of the data tables in Chapter 4 are old (e.g. 1970, 1974, 1976), and there are scant legal updates in Chapter 2 (which is predominantly pre-2000). A 2012 book should have current data and references to warrant a third edition. Also missing are further reading lists per cult or chapter. Some of the cult web addresses and organisations listed in Chapter 3 and 4 no longer work as stated (e.g., Foundation for Religious Freedom; Heaven’s Gate; Institute for the Study of American Religion; Osho [Rajneesh] Foundation International; Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment; Sukyo Mahikari), or, more understandably, they default to other sites following their closure or reinvention (e.g. Elan Vital; Erhard Seminars/The Forum; The Family International/Children of God). Some have changed names but kept the old web address (e.g. ‘The Local Church’ is now ‘Living Stream Ministry’), or are now de facto product selling sites (e.g. Rastafarianism) or nostalgia sites (e.g. The Synanon Church). Conversely, the valid, working websites are a fascinating entry into their respective religious worlds and anti-cult networks which are worthy of detailed exploration and study.

Overall, the third edition of Cults: A Reference and Guide is an introductory overview of the field suitable for beginning undergraduates and interested others, but it is a bit dated for contemporary research purposes. One will always quibble about entry assessments and potential inclusions or exclusions made, but hopefully, the breadth of the book’s topics and attendant cult issues will whet readers’ appetites and fuel their own explorations into this ever-expanding, controversial, and exciting field.

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