

## New Religious Movements

By Mike Garde MA Director of Dialogue Ireland Trust

Note: For ease of reference and convenience we have included a html copy of this document on our website that you can access here:

<http://www.dialogueireland.org/nrm.html>

Part Three of the Syllabus on New Religious Movements shows the complexity for both the teacher and the student in relation to naming names, or clarifying what is meant by a New Religious Movement, (NRMs) Cults or Sects.

[http://www.curriculumonline.ie/uploadedfiles/PDF/lc\\_religion\\_sy.pdf](http://www.curriculumonline.ie/uploadedfiles/PDF/lc_religion_sy.pdf) p. 39.

The Guidelines for teachers tries to address, by not using the C word, and using NRM as a non threatening alternative term.

<http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Publications/LCREGuidelines.pdf> p. 40

Both of the above documents may be obtained directly from the Dialogue Ireland website here: <http://www.dialogueireland.org/nrm.html>

This an understandable conclusion considering that Ireland has no real studies on world religion or cult studies to develop a vocabulary of classification for the Irish context. The purpose of this article is to help the teacher and student to further their understanding in this field and to provide resources which can assist this process.

The article will therefore be concerned to clarify the terminology used to classify the types and categories of groups generally referred to as *cults*, *sects*, and *NRMs*. There has been an explosion of terminology in recent years and this has led to a challenging lack of clarity in both scholarly work and the popular media. The preferred term used will be *NRMs*. In stipulating this choice the work of Johannes Aagaard and Helle Meldgaard has been influential. In their view,

The terminology varies. Some call them religions; some call them expressions of Spirituality. We call them new religious movements, thereby simply indicating, that these phenomena are new in the sense of timing, even if they have older roots, religious in their pretensions and practices, movements since most of them have not – yet – settled down as regular religions and institutions. ...The movements are not as new as we might think, but they are new in the sense that they are modern, for they are the children of modernism, even if they appear to promote 'the old paths'. Their religiousness is often questioned by their efficient and secular approaches to power and finances. The quality of movements of course depends on their ability to move.

J. Aagaard and H. Meldgaard, *New Religious Movements in Europe* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1997)

It is important to note, however, that the term *cult*, despite academic resistance, continues to play a part in the popular understanding of *NRMs* such that its meaning also needs to be clarified. Here the term *cult* will be understood to refer to a tendency or mentality that can be observed in any organisation, rather than a particular form of group structure.

The Director of Dialogue Ireland, Mike Garde obtained his MA for his thesis, "Spirituality and Cultism: A case study of a New Religious Movement- The Magnificat Meal Movement." This thesis is available on line as resource to grapple with this subject.

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/03/09/discussion-around-cults/>

Chapter Two investigates and evaluates the question of terminology and its classification. This chapter uses an interdisciplinary approach to critically review what scholars in the field are saying. A new definition of *cultist NRMs* is advanced. This necessitates a move away from identifying groups or persons allegedly involved in *cults* in favour of the recognition of patterns of behaviour and human mentalities called *cultist tendencies* or *attitudes* that can be clearly identified and analysed. This new approach has clear educational, pastoral, spiritual and theological advantages. Going on to read the thesis will provide one with profiles for the exercise in 3.2 and a way of seeing the relevance. Also the new way of looking at this issue will make the relevance of manipulation and control not a question of identifying groups like Waco or Jonestown, but looking at what is happening around us. The term cult has been used in regard to the way a woman candidate in Dublin central was treated by her political colleagues and how the voting public responded.

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/06/19/789/>

Or the way the Anglo Irish bank operated could fit with in our definition.

Now we refer to *cultism*. This term names a mentality that can be found anywhere:

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/04/29/cults-are-not-just-religious/>

Inside the Churches:

(<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/05/10/a-story-of-cultist-attitudes-and-abuse/> )

The example of Colm O’Gorman and the abuse scandals in Ireland springs to mind. How could his religiously observant family have ever imagined that Sean Fortune, then a priest in good standing, could ever have done what he did to their son? Herein lies the core of the question in this and in other forms of spiritual and religious deviancy. At the heart of most such phenomena lies the reality of deviant or heterodox tendencies, mentalities and worldviews, and that *cultist NRMs* are best identified in these terms. It is to be noted that those who joined Debra, (the subject of the thesis,) were drawn from the most loyal elements within Catholicism; yet they found the capacity within themselves to give up all and transfer to Australia because of Debra’s influence and attraction. This suggests that at first it was the visions, then the sense of community, and then the appearance of being more orthodox than the Pope that attracted her followers. The fact that others were similarly attracted was supportive of a change of allegiance, even if this dynamic was not initially evident. More specifically in a Catholic context, shows that it was the claim that she was the only one who was truly Catholic, along with the intangible elements and desires found in the make up of a follower, that became the magnet. We can see this phenomenon again in the House of Prayer on Achill and its founder Christina Gallagher.

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/category/house-of-prayer/>

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/06/11/cultist-attitudes-can-appear-in-any-group-including-our-own/>

We have argued in favour of a move away from reference to *cults* however well defined to one that favours the identification of a *cultist tendency* and/or *attitude* that can affect individuals, families, political parties, independence movements, businesses, and social groups. This identification of a mentality or tendency can now be applied to other religious, philosophical or human potential movements found in Ireland and elsewhere. Such tendencies can be found in churches, mosques, sects, and *cultist NRMs* as well as other ideologically driven groups to which people give allegiance.

- **Why people join these types of groups?**

There is no simple reason as to why one person joins a group and another does not. We have already noted how black and white thinking and the presentation of options in extreme terms attracts some people. In a period when some religious institutions are compromised and the authority of the mainline churches is suspect people turn to visionaries and in some sense the more outlandish the claims the more the person is followed. We saw earlier how some find in groups a sense of community, and feel they are part of an authentic experience. Also in some cases we note that highly intelligent people are also attracted. Also it is my experience that people coming from dysfunctional families where addictions are found, where there is a lack of emotional intelligence get involved. Then there are cases where no particular issues arise, they just are recruited because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Extreme examples like the London 7/7 and Glasgow Airport bombers show how induction and indoctrination can lead to a particular form of mind control which seems to alienate persons in a very short time and they become lost to their families and friends.

- **Identify reasons why NRMs are on the increase.**

The cult of personality has been a feature of the last decade. Groups like Scientology were able use members like Tom Cruise to make inroads into the artistic community. This was very much a plan devised by L Ron Hubbard the founder of Scientology. Secularisation has produced a reaction where some seek meaning in the transcendent, and as they have rejected Religion, which is seen as dead and lifeless, they find Spirituality is somehow more attractive and seemingly without boundaries and can lead to people embracing the divine in ways not known before. Some Irish people have left their families and gone into the jungles of South America and like Shamans take Ayahuasca, a hallucinogenic, mind altering substance. Mass travel and migration has brought different religious views into our monochrome world. The atomisation of life and the breakdown of community and move to individualism all point to more options and religious choice. In this mix there are cultist options amidst the rich tapestry of options available today. Also for some the cult can provide the enforced structure some need to survive.

- **Who do they target?**

Generally the bright, the young and those with money. Many gifted people give many years of their lives to movements without pay or just enough to survive. John Duignan in his book, "The Complex," describes this process in great detail. He was involved with Scientology's Special Forces called the Sea Org.

Idealism which is misdirected is a common feature of those who join. They think they are involved in a programme of universal significance only to find it is in reality they are forwarding a sectoral and self interested project.

- **What harm they can do?**

Obviously some groups are more toxic than others, but some of the effects of these groups can be the loss of family in two senses, one would be ones family of origin, and the other would be that a person would give up marriage because Armageddon was at hand or have an abortion to remain in the Sea Org so that one does not become burdened by having to bring up children. Often the groups keep their members so occupied they have no time to think. Gradually they cut themselves off from their families, and the particular group takes over their life.

Some experience similar effects to those associated with **Posttraumatic stress disorder** (abbreviated **PTSD**.) Diagnostic symptoms include reexperience, such as flashbacks and nightmares; avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma; and increased arousal, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, anger, and hyper vigilance. Per definition, the symptoms last more than six months and cause significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (e.g. problems with work and relationships.)

Two examples can be used to illustrate this:

Disfellowshipping, a practice revised by the Jehovah's Witnesses. What is supposed to be used as a form of excommunication for serious moral lapses is used as tool of ideological control and suppression of dissent.

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/06/24/jehovahs-witnesses-und-mental-abuse/>

Disfellowshipping! What does this mean to a JW? A JW is expected to only socialise within the JW-organisation. If he's disfellowshipped, he is confronted with a dilemma: The world "outside" is unknown, there are no close friends, the people "inside" are forbidden to talk to him, they are forbidden to greet him, if they meet - for example - at the local supermarket.

"Keep Yourselves in God's Love", a JW publication which was issued in 2008, states:

*We do not have spiritual or social fellowship with a disfellowshipped one. A simple 'Hello' to someone can be the first step that develops into a conversation and maybe even a friendship. Would we want to take that first step with a disfellowshipped person? Is strict avoidance really necessary? Yes. Loyal Christian family members do not look for excuses to have dealings with a disfellowshipped relative not living at*

*home. Rather, loyalty to Jehovah and his organization moves them to uphold the Scriptural arrangement of disfellowshipping.*

That means a JW-apostate has to live in complete social isolation.

Many of the apostates can't face that kind of pressure; they surrender... like repentant sinners they creep back in to the arms of the JW-organization.

But what happened to people facing that kind of pressure, not willing to surrender

And who leave?

1. They are totally ostracised and avoided- treated as dead.
2. They become disorientated through the loss of their beliefs and values.
3. "Satan's World" is how the JW views the world outside the group and it is scary place to go after leaving.
4. Psychological trauma and in extreme cases suicide.

A similar process exists within Scientology called "Disconnection." This is where the Scientologists totally breaks from their family.

<http://anoneire.ning.com/photo/2163779:Photo:22>

Often burn out and depression result from involvement and many sacrifice their own professional future to become a slave to the group. John Duignan spent twenty years in the Sea Org, he lost that time and is now trying to go to College and develop relationships twenty years late- what an emotional and intellectual loss. The CV of a former members is a story of the development of survival skills developed in the cultist NRM and the sense of professional loss when they emerge back into the real world. They are a bit like those Japanese soldiers who emerged from the jungle not knowing the war was over thirty years later. They have the hope for normality and the realisation that the intensity of their former involvement will never be able to be fully recovered.

### • What methods do they use?

Door to door visits, street recruitment where the person was contacted when they were vulnerable, or overwhelmed by the sales pitch. Use of advertising in regional papers contacts, infiltration with organisations like The **Citizens Commission on Human Rights** (or **CCHR**) which is opposed to psychiatry and have links with Scientology, and here in Ireland is made up of mostly of Scientologists.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens\\_Commission\\_on\\_Human\\_Rights](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens_Commission_on_Human_Rights)

[http://www.cchr.ie/About\\_CCHR\\_Ireland.html](http://www.cchr.ie/About_CCHR_Ireland.html)

Narconon which addresses the drug addiction using Scientology. They attempt to present themselves as genuine members of the anti drugs fight.

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~dst/Narconon/>

<http://anoneire.ning.com/page/2163779:Page:534>

Here in Ireland finding bodies that are into inter-faith dialogue without them being aware of the true identity of their dialogue partners.

- **How do you develop critical discernment when encountering NRMs?**

As in other areas of life, there are no simple ways to prevent membership of these movements. Some things to consider:

1. Recognise your vulnerability. Any of us can come under undue influence. Never respond when down to any offer. Loss of a relationship or family member etc.
2. When approached by the member of a group, do not allow them to claim your space. Take information, but do not give any, no contact details. Take the initiative and say I will get back to you IF I am interested. Do not take up offer of free personality test, stress test or free this or that. Be assertive not aggressive.
3. Check the group out on google. If there is a neutral reading, then add the word cult or scam to find out more. Also check things out with a teacher or parent before responding to an offer to attend a free seminar, or go to a party organised by the group.

### **Resources:**

Some schools have modules on NRMs and **Dialogue Ireland** can provide advice on resources to be used in class. They also provide a two period presentation which is explained on the web site in the Services We Provide.

<http://www.dialogueireland.org/dicontent/services/index.html>

Also our video library can be accessed directly from the internet for use in the school.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/DialogueIreland>

It is important to stress that the talk is an overview on manipulation and we normally approach the Principal in the school as it not only is presented in the religion slot, but as a general preparation for third level. With the shift away from religion it is important that young people are prepared. We do not supplant the role of the teacher who generally presents a whole module on different aspects of this issue.

Below you will find our web site where you will find an A-Z of groups. You will also find links to other web sites. We generally provide connections to groups like Scientology believing it is important to allow the group we are critical to have their web site accessible.

<http://www.dialogueireland.org/>

For more current material look at our Blog

<http://www.dialogueireland.wordpress.com/>

**Factnet**

[www.factnet.org](http://www.factnet.org)

**The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)**

<http://www.icsahome.com/>

**The Apologetics Index**

<http://www.apologeticsindex.org/>

**Centre for Studies on New Religions**

[www.cesnur.org](http://www.cesnur.org)

**US & World Religion Statistics - Church Statistics - World Religions**

<http://www.adherents.com/>

The Irish Anonymous web site concerned with Scientology. They have an extensive archive valuable for teachers and students. Also documentaries on Scientology.

<http://anoneire.ning.com/>

With the broad definition we are using for cultism we suggest looking at this site.

<http://www.childabusecommission.ie/>

Berry Jason and Renner Gerald (2004) *Vows of Silence* New York: Free Press

Coverley Merlin (2009) *Utopia* Harpenden: Pocket Essentials

John Duignan and Nicola Tallant (2008) *The Complex – An insider exposes the covert world of the Church of Scientology* Dublin: Merlin Press.

Michael A. Fuss (1998) *Rethinking New Religious Movements* Rome: Research Centre on Cultures and Cultures, Gregorian Pontifical University

Morgan Giles (2009) *Freemasonry* Harpenden: Pocket Essentials

Harding Nick (2005) *Secret Societies* Harpenden: Pocket Essentials

Hunt J. Stephen (2007) *Alternative RELIGIONS* Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited

O'Gorman Colm (2009) *Beyond Belief* London: Hodder & Stoughton

Partridge, Christopher (2004) *Encyclopedia of New Religions* Oxford: Lion

Partridge, Christopher (2007) *The World's Religions* Oxford: Lion

Ramsay Robin (2006) *Conspiracy Theories* Harpenden: Pocket Essentials