

Antiquity and Social Reform

Antiquity and Social Reform:
Religious Experience in the Unification
Church, Feminist Wicca and Nation of Yahweh

By

Dawn L. Hutchinson

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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This manuscript is dedicated to my husband Jesse
and daughter Piper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Abstract	xi
Introduction	1
An Historical Approach to the study of New Religious Movements Summary	
Chapter One.....	21
The Unification Church as a Restoration Movement	
Existing Scholarship on the Unification Church	
History of the Unification Church	
The Conservative Movement and the Unification Church	
What the Unification Church Offered its Members	
Explanation of Why Christianity Needed Restoration	
Personal Religious Experience and Special Relationship with God	
A Role in the Restoration of Christianity	
America's Role in the Restoration of Christianity	
Summary	
Chapter Two	61
Feminist Wicca, A Neopagan Religious Movement	
Existing Scholarship on Feminist Wicca	
History of Feminist Wicca	
Rhetoric of the Feminist Movement	
Rhetoric of the Re-emerging Goddess	
What Feminist Wicca Offered its Members	
Explanation of Why Judeo-Christian Religions Failed Women	
Personal Religious Experience and Special Relationship with the Goddess	
The Possibility of Ending Patriarchal Oppression in America	
Summary	

Chapter Three	117
Nation of Yahweh, A Black Hebrew-Israelite Religion	
Existing Scholarship on the Nation of Yahweh	
History of the Nation of Yahweh	
Black Power Rhetoric	
Hebrew Identity Rhetoric	
What the Nation of Yahweh Offered its Members	
Explanation of Why Christianity Failed Blacks	
Personal Religious Experience and Special Relationship with God	
The Possibility of Ending White Oppression in America	
Summary	
Conclusion.....	159
Afterword	171
Notes.....	173
Bibliography	197
Biographical Sketch.....	209

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ABSTRACT

Although religious innovation in America historically has been the norm rather than the exception, mainstream Americans have often viewed new religious movements with suspicion and occasionally with outright alarm. The question motivating many studies of new religious movements has been “why would someone join these religions?” In this book, I offer at least one answer to this often repeated query. I argue that followers of new religious movements in the 1960s-1980s, specifically the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh, considered these religions to be legitimate because they offered members a personal religious experience, a connection to an ancient tradition, and agency in improving their world. Utilizing an historical approach, I consider the conversion narratives of adherents and primary literature of the formative years of these movements, which demonstrate that the religious experiences of the adherents and a resonance with the goals of these religions propelled individuals into social action.

INTRODUCTION

Although religious innovation in America historically has been the norm rather than the exception, mainstream Americans have often viewed new religious movements with suspicion and occasionally with outright alarm. Leaders in established religions, the media, and sometimes religion scholars have warned that these “alternative” religions are deviant and perhaps even dangerous for Americans to join. In this book, I argue that followers of the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh considered these religions to be legitimate because they offered members a personal religious experience, a connection to an ancient tradition, and agency in improving their world. These new religions developed in the 1960s through the early 1980s and offered their potential members a vision of a more inclusive, more morally responsible American society during a time of cultural upheaval and uncertainty. Previous studies of these new religious movements have overlooked their complexity, their humanness, and their conceptual organization of the world.

The new religious movements described in the following text were surrounded by social controversy in various ways. For instance, many Americans in the 1960s and 1970s believed that the Unification Church brainwashed its young members, forcing them to leave their families and disassociate from the ones they loved. The Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the Unification Church, spent time in prison for tax evasion, and the media has condemned the movement for its financial success for many years. American society also criticized Feminist Wicca, with its links to the feminist movement, for its woman-centered ideology. Many Americans considered Feminist Wiccans to be “man-haters” intent on using magic to emasculate American power structures. In addition, Feminist Wicca’s links to Wicca and witchcraft left it open to charges of devil worship by Christians misunderstanding Wicca’s ideology. Very few people have focused on the ideology of the Nation of Yahweh, since the media was understandably more interested in its criminal activities. Yahweh ben Yahweh, the founder of the Nation of Yahweh, and seventeen of his followers, were convicted on charges of racketeering in Miami, Florida in the 1980s. The charges included firebombing a Miami neighborhood, conspiracy to commit murder, and a host of other violent crimes. While I do not wish to condone or ignore the controversial aspects

of these new religious movements, I argue here that members of these religions were acting in accord with religious ideologies understood in the context of their religious experiences. Adherents believed that their actions were part of a larger plan to bring about a better America.

The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh appealed to people who considered themselves outsiders in American society. They were not outsiders by choice; they yearned to be a part of American society without sacrificing their uniqueness. They would have rejected the premise of Israel Zangwill's World War I play *The Melting Pot*, which invoked the sentimental notion that different races, ethnicities and religious beliefs combined in America to make something new.¹ The young Americans drawn to these new religious movements thought that Zangwill's vision of a "land of opportunity where race, religion, and national origin should not be a barrier to social mobility"² was a naïve notion. Clearly, for many of them, race, religion, gender, and national origin continued to be barriers to social mobility. In addition, they did not wish for the variety of ethnic, religious, and national identities evident in America to be "melted" into a monolithic mold.³ These idealistic people, most of them young, argued that America's praise could not be sung in a single voice. It required harmony sung in dozens of parts, the combination producing the necessarily nuanced chorus of their country's diverse culture. Each voice longed to be individually recognized, no longer overshadowed by the melody.

Many Americans discontented with what they believed was a culture obsessed with consensus sought both secular and religious solutions. Along with the "new left," the "civil rights movement," and the nascent "neo-conservative" movements in the 1960s and 1970s, emerged a smaller, but equally zealous faction hoping to change the world through their religious visions of what America could become. These optimistic believers chose to reject traditional religions in order to join new religious movements that promised to make them active agents for social change in America.

This study focuses specifically on those who embraced the ideologies of the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh in 1960s and 1970s America. Many devotees of these new religions felt disillusioned by their childhood religious traditions, considering them to be complicit in quieting their voices. While those attracted to these groups wanted personally to reconstruct American society, they felt they lacked the individual status needed to achieve change. Some felt too young. Some believed skin color or ethnicity disenfranchised them from secular power.

Many were overwhelmed at the enormity of their task, whether they worked individually or together in like-minded communities.

In these new religious movements, members found a combination of factors they believed was missing in traditional religions and certainly in secular social movements: a personal religious experience, a connection to an ancient religious tradition, and the imminent possibility of improving their world. The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh promised to make the voices of their membership heard in the larger American chorus. The conversion story of Teresa, a young woman from New York who joined the Unification Church in the 1970s, bears witness to this search for a relevant religious experience:

I am 25 years old, and have been a member [of the Unification Church] for 2½ years. I was born in Long Beach, New York, the second of five children. I attended Long Beach Catholic School for 8 years, went to Mass regularly, was a good student and have only good memories attached to my childhood years.

When I was 15, our family bought a new home further out on Long Island in East Setauket. I attended a public high school and had no trouble making friends and adjusting in the new neighborhood. I did begin to realize, however, that it was becoming increasingly difficult to avoid situations where drinking, smoking, and sex weren't the main activity or topic of discussion.

Later on, drugs came into the picture and it seemed as though the ideals of faith, hope, love, and strength were disappearing from the hearts of a good part of my generation. My trust in God remained, though I couldn't find the answers to many of my questions in the church, in the Bible, or reflected anywhere in the world around me. Still, I knew that the words of Jesus were true and absolute whether or not society in general or I individually chose to maintain the standard he taught and lived by.

I decided to investigate what different groups and organizations were studying and doing toward improving the present situation of the world and of themselves. I, along with my mother, became part of a Catholic Charismatic group where we could feel a new awakening of spirit for the first time. It emphasized the guidance and healing that could come from total reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It was through this experience that my heart and mind were open at the time I met the Unification Church.

Though I had many physical blessings, the moment of truth came when I realized that it was up to me to decide just how much I was willing to sacrifice to follow what I believed to be true. Frankly, I never expected that someday I might be called to devote my life to serve God HIS way, and not mine. This was the real awakening.

I'm deeply grateful that I am able to participate in this movement right now, which has strengthened and cemented what basic moral values I had,

only from Reverend Moon I've learned not to compromise. I deeply respect and admire him for his humility before God and the love he has for mankind. Example, once again, is the best teacher.

I also want to mention that my mother and two of my sisters are also active members of the Unification Church as well. Truth knows no age. Since they joined two years ago, our love has grown deeper and broader in knowing that only through our unity can God's will on earth be understood and accomplished.⁴

The Unification Church's call for personal sacrifice as a way to bring about a more moral society influenced Teresa because she had been looking for a way to improve herself while changing her world. The Unification Church appeared to be a legitimate faith to Teresa because she had a religious experience as part of her conversion. While earlier involvement in a Catholic Charismatic group also gave her a "religious awakening," the Unification Church challenged her personally to become an agent for change. This charge inspired her to embrace a larger religious vision.

Following the sometimes hedonistic upheaval of the Sixties, young people such as Teresa searched for a similarly radical, but very different kind of revolt – a revolution that turned religious faith into a catalyst for both personal and social change as surely as the Pill. Part of their transformation included the rejection of traditional religions. Potential participants in these new religious movements believed that "mainstream" churches had fallen short in their efforts to recreate American society. Moreover, future members of these alternative religions concluded that Christianity, specifically, was not merely missing the solution, but in fact was part of the problem. They believed that Christianity reinforced the larger American culture's moral worldview. These young people argued that Christianity accepted, and occasionally propagated, sexism and racism. In that way, conventional Christianity lost legitimacy for some of its believers, driving them to look elsewhere for spiritual grounding. Some found the answers they sought in the emerging new religious movements.

The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh promised to equip members with the tools they needed to be personally involved in remaking their world. The Unification Church offered a way to purify the morally corrupt American society and the rest of the world through perfected families. It pledged that individual sacrifice would prepare the world for God's forgiveness and salvation. Feminist Wicca, on the other hand, proposed a vision of a peaceful American society in which women and men shared power equally. Wiccans offered ancient Goddess religions as a model for an egalitarian society, which they believed would

end gender disparity in America. The Nation of Yahweh claimed that American blacks descended from the ancient Hebrews, the chosen people of God. Since the Nation's members professed to be the true Jews, they laid claim to their God-given right to govern themselves under His guidance. They declared that once blacks (and whites) knew the "true" identity of American blacks, American society would correct its racial inequities.

The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and The Nation of Yahweh not only supplied solutions to their members' problems on these fronts, they also explained the failures of traditional religions. In spiritual terms, new religious movements provided direction, meaning and power for potential members: the elements of an obtainable goal. The Unification Church explained that Christian churches had misunderstood the "true" mission of Jesus. They claimed that God sent Jesus to create the perfect human family, which would restore the relationship between God and humans. Unificationists believed that if they led perfected lives and created families who sacrificed their needs for the Church, members could help restore God's will for humanity. Wiccans insisted that the Judeo-Christian traditions failed women because these established religions offered theological validation for the oppression of women. They maintained that the Christian male deity reinforced the patriarchal order. Feminist Wiccans asserted that seekers could find solutions to these problems in the ancient goddess religions, which proclaimed women as equals and which could, in modern America, legitimize women's role in shaping not only religion, but public policy. Finally, amidst widespread racial discrimination, The Nation of Yahweh offered members a vision of a refined American social order for blacks in which power shifted in their favor. The group's leaders believed that white slave owners and others claiming Jewish descent had intentionally withheld knowledge of blacks' Hebrew identity. The Nation of Yahweh taught its members that if they reclaimed their Hebrew heritage, they would achieve a kind of parity in a white-dominated society, bringing about their desired social goals. While their approaches differed, each of these new religious movements shared a critical optimism: each offered an explanation of why traditional religions had failed, and each offered hope for an American society that would incorporate their various visions in ways that would make the nation a better place.

In addition to the grand visions of a reformed American society, new religious movements offered potential members the prospect of improvement on the individual level. In other words, everybody won. Society would improve, but so would members of these new religious

movements. The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh promoted a personal relationship with their deity and a meaningful religious experience. The Unification Church offered a connection with the Christian God who had suffered, been misunderstood, and only wanted the best for his children. Feminist Wicca provided women with the goddess, a deity with whom women, who had been oppressed by the male God of patriarchal religion, could relate on a more personal level. The Nation of Yahweh claimed a fatherly black deity, the God of the ancient Hebrews, who gave black members a sense of status and entitlement.

The “religious experiences” offered by each of these religions differed and were closely tied to the personal relationship with the deity. None of these religions dictated what constituted an authentic religious experience by an individual. It could be a feeling that they were on the right path, a mystical vision, a deep emotional connection with the deity, or a feeling of belonging to the community. While I will describe some of the religious experiences in the following chapters as related by adherents, I am more interested in the response to the experience than the encounter itself. I argue here that the religious experience served to authenticate the new religious movement for persons and was a catalyst for their social action.

Although these religions professed to offer a new religious path, each of them also claimed connections with an ancient religious tradition. This lent them some authority to spread their religious views. History provided the affirmation. While they claimed to be starting something novel in the 1960s and 1970s, American new religious movements, including those discussed in this book, tended to appropriate many of their so-called “new” ideas from existing religious traditions. This connection resonated with people raised in organized religions; these links with the past (to a certain extent) endowed the new religions with legitimacy for potential adherents. Aidan Kelly, an adherent and scholar of Neo-Paganism and Wicca, accordingly observed: “All religions begin as new religions at some time and place; almost all of them proceed to claim a great antiquity for themselves as part of their foundational myth.”⁵

Whether new religious movements claim roots from ancient Asian traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, or from Judaism, formative Christianity, Islam or Celtic traditions, most new religions adapt ancient tradition to suit contemporary worldviews. New religions of 1960s and 1970s America hoped to ground themselves in historical religions through such a process of adaptation. The Unification Church asserted that it taught the original intent of God for Christianity in their perfected families. Feminist Wicca professed that ancient goddess religions offered

the answer to America's gender conflicts. The Nation of Yahweh, meanwhile, maintained that American blacks were descended from the ancient Hebrews, and therefore inherited the promises in the Hebrew Bible made to the chosen people of God.

New religious movements had many reasons to incorporate ancient religious traditions in the formation of their religious identity. The most important was to establish credibility with their potential adherents. Successfully making the case for historical connections gained the new religions a certain amount of authority for attracting potential members. Aligning themselves with ancient religious traditions accordingly became a statement of identity for these new religious groups; connecting to the past kept newcomers and outsiders from dismissing the movements as come-lately crackpots. Claiming old traditions, then refining them, meant sacredness, not sorcery. History gave the beliefs and values – whatever they were – authority. These connections placed the new religions into a familiar framework of thought—the recovery of a usable historical past—that allowed them to claim more easily a place in contemporary culture.

An Historical Approach to the study of New Religious Movements

Many religions have the goal to make their vision of the ideal world a reality. While new religious movements share this same objective, they have become widely misunderstood. Sometimes biased histories by members or outsiders cause confusion about these religions. Adherents often wrote histories about their religious movements because they wanted their religion viewed through a particular ideological lens. In addition, some scholars in the past were interested in showing how these movements deviated from “traditional” religions or how aspects of their beliefs compared to similar movements. These previous histories of new religious movements failed to take into account the religious experiences of adherents or how the teleological vision of these movements affected the practical application of their beliefs. In addition, early scholarship on new religious movements used the terms “occult,” “cults,” or the kinder term, “alternative” to refer to these religions, which already held negative connotations in the larger American culture. In many cases, scholars were interested in one facet of the religion without taking the cultural context into consideration. In this text, by contrast, I demonstrate that these religious movements are far more complex, visionary, and concerned with individual members than previously shown.

Often, new religions are misunderstood because their religious practices or beliefs are unfamiliar to “mainstream” America. Typically, scholars have either assumed that new religious movements indicate a social problem needing to be solved or they approach new religions as oddities needing to be defined and enumerated.⁶ Thus, in order to facilitate a conversation between members and non-members of new religious movements, much scholarship on new religious movements tends to be phenomenological. Hence, it is mostly concerned with describing the beliefs and practices of these movements. Many scholars, such as J. Gordon Melton and James Lewis, have formulated reference texts for studying new religious movements, such as Lewis’ *Cults in America: a Reference Handbook*.⁷ These texts give a brief historical background of the development of new religious movements, information about their religious leaders, and a description of their beliefs and practices. While immensely helpful as reference tools for scholars and students, these types of texts are descriptive, rather than analytical or explanatory.

While phenomenological approaches are important for approximating an objective perspective in the study of religions, scholars also need to examine how members of new religions comprehend their place in the world. Lorne L. Dawson, a sociologist at the University of Waterloo, contends that “new religious movements grow out of a desire to satisfy certain spiritual needs of humanity that have a reality and importance independent of our other social and psychological needs.”⁸ In order to understand new religious movements, Dawson explains that one must make sense of them within the context of the circumstances and perspectives of the actions of their members. With Dawson’s recommendations in mind, this book is geared toward understanding the worldviews of its subjects in all of their complexity.

The unfamiliar practices and worldviews of new religious movements of the 1960s and 1970s sometimes embroiled these religions in cultural controversy. Thus, several scholars became interested in studying the reactions of the surrounding society to the beliefs and practices of these new religious movements. These scholars examined the responses of other religions, the media, and secular culture to the alternative religions they studied.⁹ Jim Beckford, a British sociologist at the University of Warwick, charted the development of the “cult controversy” as a social phenomenon. In *Cult Controversies: the Societal Response to New Religious Movements*, he explains that while insights from psychology, history and religious studies are helpful in studying new religious movements, scholars must “explore the social processes whereby the interactions between humans can generate controversy.”¹⁰ Beckford

believes that studying the relationships linking members to their movements, and the movements in turn to the society, allows the scholar to more easily make comparisons across space and time.¹¹ I take one of my leads from Beckford in writing about new religious movements in this book (additionally I place the religious movements within the historical context of their emergence).

Understanding the dialogue between new religious movements and their surrounding culture is certainly important. This conversation reveals much about the agendas of all parties involved. The discourse surrounding new religious movements affects members of the movement, their families, the media, and those engaged in traditional religions. Because new religious movements make claims that are unfamiliar to those entrenched in “mainstream” religions, controversy often surrounds these movements. Sometimes parents or the media accuse the new religions of “brainwashing” their converts. Also, because many new religions have unusual eschatological claims and some have been involved in mass suicides or political scandals, the larger American culture distrusts them.

Since the new religious movements in this study were among those surrounded by controversy, most contemporary scholars have attempted to “step back” from the contentious aspects of the study of new religions in the interests of maintaining some objectivity. Others approach new religions in a more comprehensive fashion. John A. Saliba, religious studies professor at the University of Detroit, in *Understanding New Religious Movements*, argues that scholars must attempt to comprehend these movements from the perspectives of the movements themselves.¹² Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins, both sociologists, in their text *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, call for a middle ground between “cult bashers” and “cult apologists.”¹³ In several incisive essays, they have commented on what makes experts disagree about cults. While I agree that objectivity is essential in comprehending religious views that vary significantly from traditional beliefs, I argue in this study that scholars must make an attempt to understand the religious motivations of the members of these movements. Thus, taking a cue from Zablocki and Robbins, I do not intend to either “bash” new religious movements, nor “apologize” for them.

Religious beliefs can be powerful motivating factors. James Lewis worries that scholars often discount the religious experience of adherents when they research new religious movements. Lewis has authored two studies in which he offers an approach for studying new religions. In the first, entitled “The Scholarship of ‘Cults’ and the ‘Cult’ of Scholarship,” Lewis notes the cultural bias of scholars against new religious

movements.¹⁴ He maintains that scholars try to explain how “cults” deviate from mainstream culture, discounting any possible meaningful religious experiences that adherents might derive from these movements. In *Legitimizing New Religions*, Lewis states that phenomenologists who have studied new religious movements in the past have failed to consider the meaning that the religious experience holds for members of new religious movements. Furthermore, Lewis claims that many scholars presume that the founders of the movements intentionally fabricate religious phenomena.¹⁵ Instead of operating under these assumptions, Lewis claims, scholars studying these religions should understand that religious experiences can be powerful motivating factors.

I agree with Lewis that the religious experience of the members of new religious movements needs to be at the center of investigating these religions. This religious experience is often what endows the new religion with authenticity for adherents. While this religious experience differs for each person, it seems to be the factor motivating them to embrace the religious ideologies in these new religious movements. In order to understand why people joined new religions in the 1960s and 1970s, it is necessary to comprehend the particular meanings that the conversion experience held for believers. I argue in the following pages that devotees of new religious movements believed that their new religion could only be successful through their individual involvement, as they conceived it through their religious experience.

The following study is limited to the study of the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh. Scholars have given these movements short shrift by underestimating the significance of the adherents’ religious experiences. In the following chapters, I detail the previous scholarship on these traditions. Each of these religions was surrounded by controversy, somewhat blinding outsiders to the motivations behind these movements. What has been lacking is a history that takes into consideration the religious experience of the adherents alongside the goals of these movements. These new religions did not appear from a vacuum. Instead, they formed during the cultural turmoil of 1960s and 1970s America. They sought to restore order through their religious visions of a more morally upright, inclusive nation.

The new religious movements described in this book constructed their own group cultures, differing in certain ways from the prevailing American culture. They wished to change beliefs and values of the larger community. While apparently political in nature, each of the movements chose several distinct cultural avenues, based on their religious beliefs, to make their visions for America a reality. The Unification Church instilled

its ideas about how to purify the moral decadence in American life through small networks of families working in communities. They also became involved in academic conferences and special interest groups in order to make their vision a reality on a larger scale. Feminist Wiccans, while interested in seeing change in legislation concerning women, believed that in order for that to happen, they would need to first change how American culture perceived women. They therefore worked at the grassroots level and instilled in their members a sense of purpose and personal authority. The Nation of Yahweh drew strength from a small committed community of like-minded followers. They believed that their plans for racial equality could occur in America only if both blacks and whites understood their “true” historical identity. Thus, each group had political goals, but worked toward them through unconventional routes. A historical treatment of these religions needs to take this complexity into consideration.

The term “culture” as used in this text refers to a group’s shared values, beliefs, and patterns of meaning.¹⁶ According to Clifford Geertz, culture is a context, webs of significance humans themselves have spun, within which social events, behaviors and institutions can be intelligibly described.¹⁷ A community’s values are evident in every area of their collective lives: in governmental institutions, political movements, religious communities, educational institutions, language, art, literature, film, and music, just to name a few. America as a nation has a collective culture that reflects shared values, beliefs, and patterns of meaning. America also encompasses a variety of cultures. There are ethnic, racial, gender, and religious cultures along with professional and academic cultures, for instance. Individuals learn what to believe, who they are, and how they should behave from the different elements in the various cultures to which they belong. Culture reflects a society’s collective knowledge, which in turn, molds what an individual learns and believes.¹⁸

The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh made historical claims informed by American culture and their own “local” religious cultures. The Unification Church, immersed in its own conservative culture and Christian restoration plans, drew membership from the emerging religious right movement in America. Feminist Wicca formed its own innovative goddess culture borrowed from ancient goddess religions and the feminist movement. The Nation of Yahweh, while instilling in its membership a Hebrew identity and culture, appropriated rhetoric and strategies from the Black Power Movement. The current study is a cultural history of these new religions.

The converts of The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh in the 1960s and 1970s sought to define American

public culture through the lens of their own newly-constructed “local” cultures. They believed that their religious symbols and meanings could benefit the ordering of American life. According to sociologist James Davison Hunter, public culture consists of “procedural norms and legal codes, symbols of national identity, shared notions of civic virtue and the common ideals of the public good, and collective myths” of past and future.¹⁹ Members of these new religious movements aspired to influence each of these areas of American culture. The Unification Church, reflecting the interests of the growing religious conservatives, believed that its religion could cleanse the moral decadence it thought was leading America into decline. Feminist Wicca offered a new vision for elevating the status of women in American life through ancient goddess myths. The Nation of Yahweh believed that its religion could raise the social position of African-Americans through proper adherence to Hebrew Scriptures and the teachings of its leader, Yahweh ben Yahweh.

Because these groups based their proposed cultural changes on religious ideas, a careful examination of those religious beliefs and motivations is necessary. As Rhys H. Williams argues in “Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology?” the historian needs to be aware that the terms “culture” and “ideology” do not signify mutually exclusive realities.²⁰ While researching a group’s culture might allow for an examination of their beliefs, an ideological study might more readily be conducive to understanding individual motivations. However, when studying religious movements, Williams concludes the historian must examine the religion in light of individual motivations informed by group ideologies. He states:

Religion is a useful resource for social movements because it is a great source of what I have called both ‘culture’ and ‘ideology.’ Religion shapes identity, the sense of solidarity, and the moral outrage that are integral to social-movement cultures. Motivated believers are the core of any collective action. At the same time, religious doctrine and theology can offer coherent and elaborated cognitive rationales that diagnose social problems, prescribe possible solutions, and justify the movement’s actions—often in the cause of universal verities. Thus, religion as a political resource is both culture and ideology, with both theoretical and empirical significance for the study of politics and collective action.²¹

As Williams argues, the relationship between individual believer and religious movement is complex. While religion shapes believers’ identities and engenders moral “outrage” over societal problems, it also offers solutions justified through theological discourse.

While the new religious movements in this study each had political aspirations, they also sought to shape the values of American society. They wished to utilize the beliefs of like-minded idealistic individuals to enact social change in America. The religions in this study are limited to those formed in the late 1960s and the 1970s. The Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh responded to the late 1960s and early 1970s cultural environment in constructing and promoting new religious ideologies through which they intended to influence American life. To that end, the literature I review here and the conversion stories I analyze are limited to those written or given orally during the formative period of each religion.

Thus, research for this book included consulting archives, as well as primary and secondary literature, for the new religious movements included in this study. Each of these movements has an array of primary literature. These include texts written by founders of each religion during the historical period under study, newsletters for each, and brochures advertising meetings and agendas for the Unification Church and Feminist Wicca. The University of California-Santa Barbara's special collections library houses the latter, along with various unpublished works. In addition, newspaper articles revealed how each of these traditions viewed themselves and how aspects of American culture viewed them during their formative years. In the following chapters, I specify the literature and secondary research consulted for each religion.

Conversion narratives for each new religious movement represent the most important aspect of this research. These narratives, recorded during the 1960s and 1970s give the views of adherents at the times when they joined these movements. One challenge encountered during the research for this study was problematic data. Part of this was due to missing or fragmentary witness accounts that had a mediating source. Also, because this study considered three very different religions, the sources of information varied a great deal. However, the available interviews help to explain devotees' motivations. This is important for this manuscript for two reasons. First, conversion stories explain what factors led to an individual's interest in a particular new religious movement. Converts to each of these religions commonly desired to change the world in a meaningful way. They believed that something the religion offered could help them accomplish that goal. For instance, if the convert felt that American society was "out of control" and spiraling toward moral collapse, they might have been more apt to look for a movement like the Unification Church, which offered a way to give America a moral compass. Second, conversion stories disclosed what significance, if any,

historical claims had in drawing in potential adherents. For example, Feminist Wicca claimed that ancient goddess religions offered a blueprint for how the revival of goddess worship could create a more egalitarian American society. Women and men searching for an historical precedent for a society that valued the contributions of women were attracted to this movement.

Because historical associations claimed by these new religious movements appealed to potential members, studies of new religions must analyze these assertions. These claimed historical connections lent the religions a certain amount of legitimacy for prospective adherents. Scholars generally take for granted that new religious movements claim ancient historical identities in order to be seen as legitimate by mainstream America. However, this assumes that new religious movements constructed their religions to appease the surrounding culture. Instead, new religious movements were often critical of their surrounding culture and, at least in their formative years, were less likely to seek its approval. It appears that prospective members were more influenced by the new religions' claims of antiquity than the larger American culture. Hence, the process of legitimation for new religious movements is a far more complex process that deserves analysis.

Max Weber suggested that religions use three methods to establish their authority with adherents: charismatic appeals, rational appeals and traditional appeals.²² While the new religious movements in this study employed all three of the strategies described by Weber, I focus mostly on the third: tradition. Although Weber used the term "strategy" to explain the process of gaining members, I would caution against assuming that this was a conscious effort by leaders of these groups. Instead, I argue here that new religious movements during the 1960s and 1970s sought converts more than the consent of society at large. Leaders of these groups sought to spread their message among like-minded individuals. Attracting members consisted of several steps: 1) a believable message considered legitimate by believers; 2) an authoritative source (claims of antiquity help here); and 3) a credible messenger. The first three steps, moreover, were accompanied by what members believed to be a religious experience.²³ This study offers the first analysis of these steps with regard to the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh.

Max Weber further explains the use of historical associations as they pertain to religions in *Economy and Society*. In this text, Weber notes that new religions appeal to traditional religions for their authority. He explains that "authority" can assume legitimacy in the eyes of the believer in several ways: it can appeal to tradition, emotion, or rational beliefs, or

appeal to something whose legitimacy is beyond questioning.²⁴ While the new religious movements in this study utilize a combination of these claims of authority, the appeal to tradition (ancient religions) is of particular interest here. Weber explains that when a movement is consciously creating new authority, it tends to claim new revelation or prophecy, unless it asserts that it offers an ancient truth that had already been established as valid. In cases of the latter strategy, the movements alleged that their truths were obscured for a time, but were “now being restored to their rightful place.”²⁵ These are precisely the types of claims made by each of the new religious movements in this study. Thus, the word “tradition” used in this book will refer to a historical, established religious group.

Summary

In addition to the considerations outlined above, there are two historical studies that shape the approach I have taken in this book. R. Laurence Moore’s *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* argues that new religious movements are the epitome of what makes American religions particularly American.²⁶ For Moore, most people in America gained a sense of what it meant to be an American “by turning aspects of a carefully nurtured sense of separate identity against a vaguely defined concept of mainstream or dominant culture.”²⁷ According to Moore, the separatist tendency in American religions points to a paradox. “The American religious system may be said to be ‘working’ only when it is creating cracks within denominations, when it is producing novelty, even when it is fueling antagonisms. These [religions] are not going on at the edges or fringes of American life. They are what give energy to church life and sustenance to the claim that Americans are the most religious people on earth.”²⁸ Moore argues that the language of dissent has a long history in the United States, and it often manifests itself in the search for a unique religious identity apart from mainstream culture.

In another study of new religious movements during the 1970s, Stephen A. Kent analyzes the identity-forming process of radically political youth who chose to follow non-traditional religious paths. The young Americans in Kent’s study, *From Slogans to Mantras: Social Protest and Religious Conversion in the Late Vietnam War Era*, abruptly shifted from political means of transforming society to spiritual means, “reinventing” themselves in the process.²⁹ Kent argues that this shift happened because these political radicals had negative experiences with their respective protest movements. They had been disappointed with the

sluggish and often nonexistent results of their secular efforts to transform American society. Kent claims that the “increasing costs and diminishing returns of political action” caused many of these young people to convert to new religious movements that offered the same goals through spiritual means.³⁰

Like Moore and Kent, I believe that an historical approach offers the most comprehensive route to understanding why converts chose to join new religious movements in the 1960s and 1970s. While Moore argues that new religious movements develop because they are continuing the tradition of dissent in America, Kent believes that particular social ideologies cause people to turn to new religious movements rather than established religions. Like Moore, I argue that new religious movements are continuing a pattern of innovation in the process of dissent. Like Kent, I argue that, to a certain degree, the feeling of powerlessness in their respective societal situations led some young people to turn to these new religious movements in the 1960s and 1970s. However, I would add to these assertions, that perhaps a more persuasive factor may have been the promise that members would be personally involved in bringing about their religious visions of a better America.

Thus, I argue that people converted to new religious movements—specifically the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca, and the Nation of Yahweh—because they believed these movements offered the most viable path toward their respective societal visions. These religions claimed that established religious traditions were no longer credible because they were complicit in creating the problems in American society. New religions drew converts with promises of personal involvement in creating an ideal America, using ancient religions as their inspiration.

In addition, in this text I describe the individual new religious movements that form the core of the following chapters. While much information is available on the Unification Church, an analysis of its conversation with the emerging religious right has been lacking. Both Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh have attracted little scholarly attention, and a history of the emergence of these movements is needed. The overall goal of the research for this study is to show the importance of historical associations for these new religious movements. Within their cultural contexts, these links to the past were critical to attracting membership and for shaping their religious visions for an improved America.

Finally, in the following chapters, I offer some suggestions as to why and how new religions form. This study proposes that new religions take shape in response to a particular need of potential members and a

perceived failure on the part of established religious traditions to effect necessary change in American society. The religions in this study offered a combination of both new and old ideas. While the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh in the 1960s and 1970s incorporated ideas from ancient religious traditions, these religions adapted those ideas to suit contemporary visions of America. Each of these religions sought to shape American society while offering adherents a closer, more personal relationship with their deity.

Although this study is limited to three new religious movements that emerged in 1960s and 1970s America, it sheds some light on larger questions in the study of religion and American culture. This project suggests what factors in society lead people to form new religious movements and what elements give authority to new religious ideas and new religious leaders. It answers, in part, why young people in the 1960s and 1970s chose new religious movements and rejected already-established religions. In addition, I offer fresh criteria for grouping new religious movements. In classifying new religious movements by their claim of ancient origins, scholars will be able to learn more about how these religions view themselves.

The first chapter of this book analyzes the conversion experience of members in the 1960s and 1970s Unification Church. Utilizing ideas and rhetoric of the emerging conservative movement, the Unification Church explained that Christian Churches overlooked Jesus' true mission on earth. This new religious movement offered potential converts an understanding of a relationship with the Christian God who had suffered as a result of his children's failures. Unificationists declared that purification of the morally corrupt American society was necessary. This cleansing of America would make salvation possible for humans in the world. In this chapter, I argue that converts were drawn into the Unification Church with the promise of a "true" Christian religious experience and the pledge that their self-sacrifice would become an integral part of bringing about a morally pure America. Because the Unification Church claimed to be restoring the original mission for Christian Churches, they appealed to formative Christianity and the creation story in Genesis for this inspiration.

In chapter two, I demonstrate that Feminist Wicca appealed to women who experienced discrimination from the patriarchal American establishment and who were in search of a religious path to their political goals. Feminist Wicca explained to their potential adherents that Christianity was responsible for stamping out the ancient goddess traditions and had instituted an age of patriarchal religions that validated secular patriarchal power structures. Feminist Wiccans offered their

adherents a vision of a peaceful, egalitarian American society that was concerned with confirming the worth of women, issues of the family, and a healthy environment. They promised women a female deity that understood their point of view and gave them legitimacy in relationships of power. They claimed that ancient goddess religions offered a model for their version of the ideal American society.

The last chapter concerns a black Hebrew Israelite tradition, The Nation of Yahweh. This new religion denounced Christianity as the religion of the white power structure. Leader Yahweh ben Yahweh also condemned black Christian ministers for compromising their black heritage and working in complicity with whites to keep blacks a subordinate race in America. The Nation of Yahweh instead offered a vision of a more desirable society for blacks in which the power structure shifted into their favor. The Nation's leaders assured their members that they would have a meaningful relationship with the black, powerful, vengeful God of the ancient Hebrews. They claimed that American blacks were descendants of the ancient Hebrews and thus were entitled to the promises made by God to His chosen people. I argue in this chapter that the Nation of Yahweh appealed to blacks frustrated with their lack of social progress and those who were intrigued with membership in the "chosen" people of God.

The conclusion of this study will discuss the benefits of categorizing new religious movements by the historical roots they claim. Grouping new religious movements in this way gives scholars a new view of how these movements perceive themselves. The Unification Church in this study professed an ancient Christian heritage. Feminist Wicca asserted that their religious beliefs and practices had roots in prehistoric goddess worship. The Nation of Yahweh claimed to be descendants of the original ancient Hebrews. While the new religious movements asserted connections with these venerable traditions, they also claimed new insights or revelation that changed the original religion. Thus, they could profess to be identified with an ancient religion, while still claiming to be a new religious movement. This association lent the new religions some legitimacy for their potential adherents, but it also offers scholars some insight into their worldviews.

The following chapters are presented chronologically, beginning with the Unification Church, formed in the 1960s, then moving to Feminist Wicca, which took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then finishing with the Nation of Yahweh, which formed at the end of the 1970s. The chapters will set each new religious movement in the historical context of its formation and give a history of the movement. Each chapter