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RADICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN MINORITY RELIGIONS

Edited by
Eileen Barker and Beth Singler



Radical Transformations in Minority Religions

All religions undergo continuous change, but minority religions tend to be less anchored in their ways than mainstream, traditional religions. This volume examines radical transformations undergone by a variety of minority religions, including the Children of God/Family International; Gnosticism; Jediism; various manifestations of Paganism; LGBT Muslim groups; the Plymouth Brethren; Santa Muerte; and Satanism.

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Beth Singler is a digital anthropologist whose first book, *The Indigo Children: New Age Experimentation with Self and Science*, was the first ethnography of this primarily online community. Currently, the Junior Research Fellow in Artificial Intelligence at Homerton College, University of Cambridge, Beth applies her anthropological approach to the stories we have about AI, digital discussions of its nature and impact, and online communities promoting apocalyptic, transhumanist, and future focussed accounts of AI.

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Series Editor Eileen Barker

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

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Edited by Beth Singler and
Eileen Barker

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This volume is dedicated to our husbands, Carl and Peter.

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15 The Mexican *Santa Muerte* from Tepito to Tultitlán: tradition, innovation, and syncretism at Enriqueta Vargas' temple

Stefano Bigliardi, Fabrizio Lorusso, and Stefano Morrone

Specialists in new religious phenomena and of Mexican history are acquainted with the fast growth of the folk devotion for *la Santa Muerte*, who is mostly worshipped by the marginal classes of Mexican society. Devotees show disillusionment both with governmental and Catholic institutions that have in turn stigmatised the saint of death. In Tepito, an old Mexico City neighbourhood, the first public altar appeared in October 2001 and its warden, Enriqueta Romero (b. 1945), always refused any kind of institutionalisation, while elsewhere there have been attempts to establish rules, associations, and hierarchies. Correspondingly, *la Santa* is represented and venerated with significant differences from place to place, notwithstanding shared beliefs and iconographic traits. Among such attempts at establishing rules was the foundation of the *Templo de la Santa Muerte Internacional* in Tultitlán (State of Mexico) by Jonathan Legaria Vargas (1982–2008), also known as *Comandante Pantera*. The official inauguration took place on 27 January 2008. At the moment of writing, the Temple is run by Jonathan Legaria Vargas' mother, Enriqueta Vargas Ortiz (1959–2018), who took up her religious role as *Madrina* (Godmother) after her son's death: Jonathan was shot dead in his car, under mysterious circumstances, on 31 July 2008. This essay reconstructs the specific traits and differences of the devotion as it is expressed at Tepito and at Tultitlán and considers change in the movements through these examples.¹

Our fundamental assumption is that Tepito and its surroundings, comprising the districts of Candelaria and Morelos, are to be considered the 'Golden Triangle' of *Santa Muerte*, namely the area where the devotion first emerged in the 2000s and where the standards for the successors were set. In other words, the devotion in Tepito is taken as the *traditional* one, whereas the Temple of Tultitlán represents a case of *innovation*. Further, such innovation came in two successive waves. First, the Temple's foundation was the result of the specific creative and entrepreneurial initiatives of Jonathan; from the outset it displayed a marked, highly personalised distinction from the shrines in Tepito in terms of rituals and symbols. Such initiatives were abruptly interrupted by Jonathan's violent death. Enriqueta Vargas became the new leader and had to respond to the situation both as a

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bereaved mother coping with a personal tragedy and as a spiritual entrepreneur assuming a religious role with which she was unfamiliar, all during the context of a deep institutional crisis. The result has been the emergence of special narratives and rituals, as well as a new, specific theology: a second wave of innovation. This chapter focuses on notable and visible manifestations of the devotion and on the attempt at institutionalizing the discourse and rituals of *Santa Muerte*. We bear in mind that these innovations should be regarded as the exception, not the rule; most devotees entertain a direct relationship with *la Santa* through domestic and street altars.

Our methodological approach is twofold. First, while being based in Mexico City, we have personally approached the shrines in Tepito and the Temple of Tlaxiaco, interviewing *la Madrina* and the devotees, and participating in Sunday rituals on five different occasions, thus embracing an ethnographic, descriptive approach. Second, as scholars, respectively, trained in philosophy, Mexican history, and sociology, we have analysed the social context of the devotion as well as *el Comandante's* and *la Madrina's* self-narratives (as contained in printed material and orally conveyed during ceremonies) in order to describe reasons for the success of Vargas Ortiz' narrative and practice. The result is an analytical reconstruction of the theological evolution of the devotion as it is practiced and preached at the Temple, in contrast with the first devotional spaces in Mexico City.

La Santa Muerte: representations and reputation

La Santa Muerte (*Saint or Holy Death*) or *Santísima Muerte* is also referred to with appellatives such as *Niña Blanca* (the White Girl); *Flaca/Flaquita* (the Skinny/the Little Skinny One); *Hermana Blanca* (the White Sister); and *Patrona* (the Patron). She is represented in print; in statues of diverse dimensions and of various materials; in jewellery; in painting and graffiti; and in tattoos. She frequently appears as a skeleton draped in a tunic or a cape, similar to medieval representations of death. Items attributed to her include arches and/or arrows; axes; books; candles; crosses; crowns a globe in her hands or under her feet; a halo; a hat; an hourglass; a lantern; a lock; an owl; a rose; balancing scales; a sceptre; a scythe; a skull; a sword; a torch; and angelic or bat wings. The number and dimensions of such associated items vary considerably. Noteworthy is the image of *la Santa* sitting on a throne; in this position she can be represented as *piadosa*, that is, holding an emaciated corpse, or even Jesus Christ himself. Further representations include her riding a horse or a motorcycle, flying over graves with the rising dead, and appearing pregnant (Figures 15.1 and 15.2) (Thompson 1998).

Santa-Muerte merchandise comprises candles; devotional books; perfumes; soap; incense; oils; powder; and sprays. Votive candles (*veladoras*) are produced in different colours, corresponding to different areas of



Figure 15.1 The biggest Santa Muerte's statue in the world (Photograph by Stefano Morrone).

intervention: black (death and power); brown (communication with the dead); blue (success in studies); golden (business and money); green (legal issues); purple (health); red or pink (love and friendship); and (bone) white (bodily purification). A version in seven colours, integrating all the respective powers, exists as well. Typically, the effigies are placed in a public or private altar,² often with more than one exemplar. The versions are prayed to, individually or collectively, and honoured with offerings such as alcoholic drinks; balloons; candles; cigarettes and cigars (often lit and placed in her mouth or hands); cigar smoke (in a *pureo* or purification ritual); cocaine stripes; food; heroin (contained in a syringe); incense; jewellery; joints; money; necklaces; rosary beads; seeds; and toys. Other forms of worship for *la Santa* include chants and cheers (*porras*); dance; musical performances (by *mariachis* or *norteño* big bands); songs; and firecrackers (Perdigón Castañeda 2008). *La Santa Muerte's* interventions in human affairs are rather down-to-earth, concrete, and useful: she mainly helps devotees in finding a job; success in business; getting out of jail; purging addictions; getting a lover back; protecting health; and in finding a good defence attorney or a just judge (Bigliardi 2016).

The popularity of *la Santa Muerte* has exploded since TV shows, such as *Breaking Bad* (season 3, 2010) and *Dexter* (season 5, 2010), represented the devotion and associated it with criminality. However, the imaginary of *Santa Muerte* as a *Narco Saint* really began to spread in Mexico during the 1990s, due to press releases that linked her to kidnappers and drug lords.



Figure 15.2 A devotee in Tultitlán (Photograph by Fabrizio Lorusso).

The *Santa* has now become part of the drug-trade mythology, together with another folk saint, Jesús Malverde, a criminal regarded by the people as a local ‘Robin Hood’, who probably lived in the first years of the 20th century in the State of Sinaloa (Gerardo et al. 2014).

The Golden Triangle in Tepito and the origins of the Holy Death

Tepito is a neighbourhood in the historic centre of the capital that represents in the collective imaginary several features, including stereotyped ones, of Mexican popular culture and the ‘art of getting by’ (Mejía Madrid 2008: 21). Tepito, and the neighbouring Merced and Morelos, are districts hosting permanent indoor and outdoor markets; these areas are known as being particularly affected by multiple forms of criminality (Ramírez 2016).

Walking from one area to another is like covering the sides of a triangle: the 'Golden Triangle of the *Santa Muerte*'. This name is also due to the presence of three important shrines, as well as to the density of effigies and other public evidence of the devotion. Over the past decade, particularly in Mexico and in the USA, new rituals have developed through imitation and innovation, syncretism, and re-elaboration, mostly inspired by the Triangle and its media propagation.

The historical roots of the devotion are somewhat mysterious. The popular view is that the Holy Death secretly emerged as a popular Mexican icon during the colonial era. Wooden or painted images of skeletons and skulls, representing death and reproducing the medieval iconography of *Memento mori*, *Justo Juez* and the Death Carts,³ had been imported by missionaries, brotherhoods and colonisers, and were adopted by indigenous people who used them to perform 'pagan rituals', until they were eventually opposed and banned by the Catholic Church (Gil Olmos 2010: 41–21). A more complete list of iconographic motifs related to death in the arts includes *Ars moriendi*; *Memento mori*; *Et in Arcadia ego*; Three ages; *Vanitas*; Death nature; Skulls and Skeletons; Self-portrait with the Death; Symbols of Death; and *Homo Bulla* (De Pascale 2007: 20–7; see also Malvido 2005).

After a period of clandestinity, the devotion re-emerged in August 2001 in Tepito, in *calle* (street) *Alfarería* 12 when *señora* Enriqueta Romero set up an altar that included a life-size *Santa Muerte* that had been donated to her by one of her sons (Baena Crespo and Morales Nava 2014). After some months, this initiative was followed by the opening of *señora* Blanca's oratory of *Santa Esperanza*, at *calle Alarcón* 38. Then, a few blocks away, the ISCAT Mex-USA Church (Holy Catholic and Apostolic Mex-USA Church) in *calle Nicolás Bravo* 35 was founded, by the self-declared archbishop (*arzobispo*) David Romo (b. 1959). This founding was also the first attempt at institutionalising the devotion. Romo's church was recognised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs from 2003 to 2005 and generated remarkable controversy. Romo not only celebrated masses but also ordained 'deacons' and created new churches in order to establish a network. Such initiatives came to an abrupt end in 2011 when he was charged with theft, kidnapping, and extortion, and sentenced to 66 years in prison (Lorusso 2013: 110–20). The sanctuary, however, is still open and managed by Romo's family and ISCAT deacons, who celebrate Sunday masses while dressed in a black cassock that makes them indistinguishable from Catholic priests. *Calle Alfarería* 12 is still the most popular and most visited shrine of the nation (and of the world), with thousands of visitors the first day of each month attending for the rosary, according to the Mexican press (Escalada Medrano 2013). On 7 June 2016, Enriqueta Romero's partner, Raymundo Romero 'don Ray', was shot to death by a couple of *sicarios* in front of her altar. As a consequence, from that date the monthly rosary has been temporarily suspended but many devotees still visit (Gilet 2016). The

oratory-shop at *calle Alarcón* 38, after a temporary and unsuccessful collaboration with ISCAT in 2002, is now autonomous. Small groups of people gather there for the rosary (very similar to the one in *calle Alfarería*) every first Sunday of the month (Mossetti 2008: 70–2).

The ritual models marking the beginning of the public devotion in the Triangle can be considered the ‘traditional’ ones. The public rosaries in the streets, guided by a master of ceremonies holding a megaphone, generate a *horizontal* model of engagement; they call for an active participation of the community. A mass such as the one celebrated by Romo and his successors corresponds to a more conservative and *vertical* model; the engagement of the community is passive and limited. A private yard, an oratory-like institution, open to the public certain hours of the day, with a shop or a specific space to make purchases and to recite rosaries and prayers, is perhaps half-way between the two models. Also popular are the itinerant altars, the ‘Saint Pilgrims’ or semi-mobile statues, carried during the religious processions or in on-demand altars, as well as ‘on demand ceremonies’ (Fragoso 2011: 5–16). Syncretism with different religions and religious beliefs are common; a significant influence is exerted both by Catholicism and by the Afro-Antillean *santería* and *palo mayombe*. Today, the global success of *Santa Muerte* is due to migration, the dramatic increase in mass media exposure, and dissemination on the internet. This is a scenario very different to the context just 15 years ago (Lorusso 2011: 59–70).

The Temple in Tultitlán

The Temple in Tultitlán can be reached in a ten-minute car-ride from the central station, half an hour from the capital in a metropolitan train. It is a plot of land with a two-storey building and a rectangular yard (approximately $50 \times 20 \text{ m}^2$) that can be accessed through a large gate or through the building itself. In the first storey is a shop selling *Santa Muerte*-related items. The second storey hosts Enriqueta Vargas’ personal offices. The building’s, as well as the shop’s, walls are decorated with colourful *murales* showing *el Comandante*, his mother, and the Aztec god of the dead. In the yard, on one of the long sides, is located an effigy of *la Santa* represented as a caped skeleton stretching her arms, made of asphalt panels on a metal structure, and standing 22.17m high. Originally white, Enriqueta had the effigy painted black after her son’s death. During the ceremonies, the devotees sit on chairs placed under a plastic roofing right in front of *Pantera*’s templet, which is a golden kiosk just next to the giant effigy. Sometimes a life-size figure of Jonathan, *el Comandante Pantera*, is placed next to the kiosk as well (Figures 15.3).

Tables are located in front of the chairs where the devotees place their own images of *la Santa* so that they can be blessed during the ceremonies. Baptisms and marriages (including same-sex ones) are performed (Santa Muerte Internacional 2010). Jonathan had believed that any time an image



Figure 15.3 Comandante Pantera's own statue (Photograph by Stefano Bigliardi).

of *la Santa* was accidentally broken, it absorbed a negative event that would have otherwise hit its owner, so the devotees bring the broken statuettes to another templet on the giant effigy's right side, where they are first left some days to 'discharge' and eventually buried beneath it. This tradition has been kept by his mother. The press calls Enriqueta Vargas '*Lideresa*,' (female

leader). However, she dislikes this form of address and she prefers to be called *Madrina* or *La Mom*.⁴

In an autobiographic booklet, co-written in 2007 with a Mexican journalist, *el Comandante* is described as a criminal, albeit a noble-hearted one, with political connections (Demier and Legaria Vargas 2007: 122), and a series of archetypes have been conflated in his profile: youngster criminal in Tepito; inmate; wrestler; biker; drug dealer; policeman; illegal migrant; entrepreneur; and pimp. He also talks about his good relationship, at least at the beginning, with David Romo (Demier and Legaria Vargas 2007: 130). The booklet is not strictly autobiographical; it reads more like an advertisement for the opening of the Temple, which is announced in the conclusion (Demier and Legaria Vargas 2007: 156). Whether its contents are true or (partly) invented, the pamphlet emphasises a connection between the movement and criminality and violence. Such a connection was also emphasised by the Mexican press after Jonathan's murder, while pointing out, somewhat sarcastically, that the Holy Death had this time failed to protect him.⁵

The account of Jonathan published by his mother, Enriqueta Vargas, is different and perhaps tempered by their relationship. According to her, Jonathan was extremely brilliant as a child and he received a Catholic education. She claimed that the nickname *Pantera* (panther) referred to a tattoo he sported on his left arm, and that *Comandante* (commander) was his role in a bikers' group (Vargas 2011: 23). In an interview, she confirmed Jonathan's expensive lifestyle, but she also claimed that he was not a delinquent: his money came from a mechanic's workshop and other unspecified 'business' (Vargas 2011: 19, 21–2).⁶

Using social networks and engaging in frequent travels to celebrate weddings and baptisms, and to take part in inauguration ceremonies of temples, Enriqueta Vargas has succeeded in creating and strengthening devotee communities in different Mexican states, in the USA and in Colombia. On 24 April 2016, while being interviewed at her altar, the *Madrina* claimed that she manages three Facebook pages, one in memory of the *Comandante*, and two in honour of the International *Santa Muerte*. Videos of their ceremonies are also posted on such pages.

Rituals at the Temple are remindful of TV shows and teleshopping programs. The *Madrina* speaks on the microphone while walking among the *hermanos devotos*, (devotee brothers) distributing words and caresses, smiles, and motherly advice. She alternates prayers with sermons that, according to her, were written by *el Pantera* before his death, and to which the worshippers listen in silence. They cry and laugh when they are told to do so by the *Madrina*. During the ceremonies, Enriqueta often glances at the devotees' smartphones, to make sure that they record and upload the videos on Facebook and she reads the prayers and requests of the online audience following her live on social media. The devotees cross themselves 'In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of *Pantera's* spirit' and *la Santa*

is invoked in a prayer mimicking the Lord's Prayer that begins with the words "Our mother in earth ...", while Enriqueta's daughter, who wears Jonathan's colourful necklaces, imparts the final aspersion as well as the individual blessing, once again in the name of *Pantera's* spirit.

Talking about the differences with traditional altars, Enriqueta pointed out in our interview with her that:

We recite the Lord's prayer for God, our Lord, because, in actual facts, we all have one God, right? But we do not recite the Ave Maria or the First and Second Mystery, as they do in other altars [...] other altars have even adopted commandments on the example of the Catholic tradition.

Rituals include heterosexual and homosexual weddings and baptisms. The idea is not completely new, since in Romo's church gay marriage and baptisms were already introduced and advertised. Such ceremonies are, however, a powerful identity marker creating a distinction from the Catholic Church. Enriqueta Vargas maintains that:

If I were to write a book, I would rather focus on the fact that the cult of the Saint is a thousand-year old and ancestral. What is modern worship? Nowadays, many people join the modern worship. It is certainly beautiful because it does not have a definite form nor a structure, so everybody keeps it as they want, but devotees are confused, because some people dress as priests and it is not a good thing. I'd never dress as a nun, by any means. Some people dress as priests and they imitate rituals of the Catholic Church. I think many individuals are still afraid to profess their faith in the *Santa Muerte*. They are afraid of people's judgement, but I think it should not be like this in Mexico. There is freedom of worship here, and we can worship whoever we want [...] why do people imitate Catholic prayers? If you join my ceremony, you will see that it is different. Why should it be as in the Catholic Church?

Moreover, Enriqueta criticises Romo's ISCAT Church and the traditional rosaries adapted for the *Santa Muerte* while she talks fondly about her itinerant services in many regions of Mexico. Such ceremonies usually take place at night, are personalised and show innovation and diversification. In our interview, Vargas described one of the itinerant rituals, a wedding including a baptism in a cave with a stretch of water, a *cenote* of the Yucatan peninsula:

First of all, we enter the underworld, a cave-like space with a *cenote*. [...] I want the ceremony to happen at night, so we will enter the forest and walk through it [...] we will then reach the cave. What a wonderful place! We will enter the cave, everything will be dark, and then one of

my ‘children,’ Carlos Ríos, the Scorpion, will hold a stone skull representing the Goddess. We will build a bonfire and then people in front of the Saint, with their hands tied up with a rope, will turn around the fire reciting their vows [...], the bride will be accompanied by witnesses holding torches, the groom by witnesses holding incense [...] when they will be in front of each other, the groom will cense the bride, and then she will do the same with the groom. [...] We will immerse in the water of the *cenote* which will be freezing! [...] We will celebrate the baptism there, and we will invite the couples to enter in the water [...] we will be joined by the majority of the group leaders.

Inspired by the ethno-nationalistic vision of ‘discovering the origins’, Vargas has also included some elements of pre-Columbian Mexico in the ceremonies – among others, shells and drums; natural elements, such as water and fire; and some statues of deities from Maya and Aztec cultures. The *Madrina* said:

I believe that our roots are good [...] I think I’m trying to go back to our roots, gradually. [...] I feel this is good, we don’t want to be like the others.

When remembering the death of her son the Commander, Enriqueta Vargas told us:

He was killed on July 31 at 2.10 a.m., and every year, here, we remember this anniversary. We always do different things, and this year some followers want to organize a night procession carrying their Saints to the temple. Many altars want to join this initiative.

Pilgrimages and processions represent a variation in the devotion of the Saint, since they are not present in Tepito. They are not totally new, however, since similar initiatives were promoted in the past by ISCAT (*El Economista* 2009), by the associations of altars and the masters of ceremonies, such as Martín George from Tepatepec (state of Hidalgo) (Chávez 2014: 18).

Mother, daughter, mourner, and influencer: the complexity of Enriqueta Vargas

Numerous interviews with national and international media and researchers portray Enriqueta Vargas as a kind, accommodating and sweet woman, with a sparkling wit and management skills. She truly believes in her mission, telling us that:

I dedicate myself exclusively to the worship of the *Santa Muerte* and God. I do not believe in other Saints nor in the Devil [...] I abandoned the Catholic faith for the *Santa Muerte*.

She also claims that, since her son died, she has accepted the loss in the name of a higher good, Peace, and, in a country torn by violence:

I want to launch a message of love and peace. *La Santa Muerte* wants to go to the border, to Michoacán, Zacatecas, Guerrero, and Tamaulipas. I want the International *Santa Muerte* to go there, in these areas torn apart by the highest rates of criminality and violence.

By accepting to be the *Madrina* of the devotion, Enriqueta Vargas embodies two contrasting roles at the same time: on the one hand, on earth, she is Jonathan's mother; on the other hand, she is his *sister*, since they both became children of *la Santa* when Enriqueta decided to convert to Jonathan's creed after his murder. Such a double role is constantly stressed during the ceremonies, especially when the sentence "*todos somos hermanos*" (we are all brothers) is shouted and when the brother-devotees shake their hands. Enriqueta herself stated in our interview:

I want them to feel as if they are talking to their brothers. As their mother, I try to give them advice as if they were my children.

La Santa herself is often described by devotees as having human characteristics, such as jealousy, or as being *cabrona* ('stubborn' or 'tough'). She is perceived as one of 'them'. However, she lacks a main narrative, a hagiography, with which a devotee can emotionally and biographically identify. She is not a human being who has been sanctified, and she did not appear for the first time anywhere, and there is no principal, original miracle for believers to connect with. In Tultitlán, the absence of such events is compensated by Enriqueta's biographical narrative: she has built her persona as a *Madrina* who is a suffering mother (a clear symbolic overlapping with Mary) but also a convert. Enriqueta thus synthesises in herself the two elements that characterise most devotees' experiences: pain and conversion. For the devotees this allows for a powerful self-identification and creates in the movement a special charisma. This self-narrative also neutralises a trait that otherwise might distance Enriqueta from the devotees: being a middle-class entrepreneur, married to an *abogado* (lawyer/attorney) with important political ties (a point she nevertheless proudly stresses in her biography, as we found while speaking with her).

Legaria based his own narrative and the construction of his religious authority on claims that he had received an esoteric apprenticeship around the world, as well as his 'tough' criminal image. In the account of his life produced by his mother, the focus shifts from this criminality to his early

spiritual vocation. He is described as endowed with extraordinary qualities, including honesty and innocence, in order to contradict the malignant rumours that followed his assassination. Narratively and visually he has become a '*Santo de la Santa*' (saint of the Saint). He now plays an advocate's role similar to that of Mary (*advocata nostra*) in Catholic doctrine. In other words, he can either perform extraordinary deeds in person or intercede with *la Santa* for devotees (Demier and Legaria Vargas 2007). Such a 'new trinity' (*Santa Muerte-Padrino-Madrina*) definitely overshadows Catholic figures, despite the devotees' (and Enriqueta's) insistence that they still believe in God.

La Santa Muerte is a more difficult religious figure: she can avoid death, because she is death, but she saves you every time except the *last* time (Gaytán Alcalá 2008: 40–51). Enriqueta, symbolically and psychologically, dealt with this deep-seated ambiguity (as well as the overwhelming, terrible *fact* that her son was killed) through the creation of a narrative in which Jonathan's atrocious assassination turns into a *success story*. Enriqueta Vargas took upon herself the role of *hija de la Santa Muerte* (a 'daughter of *Santa Muerte*'), while also presenting herself as a tireless leader who courageously endures pain and enemies' threats. Mary is traditionally described as 'daughter of her own son' and Enriqueta is now the 'sister of her own son'. Jonathan had already described death as a 'mother' but now *La Santa Muerte* is the mother to the two of them: Jonathan's death was his mother's second birth through *la Santa Muerte*. His plans can be accomplished through Enriqueta. His death is exorcised by claiming that death did come but, through the intervention of *la Santa*, it came 'without pain'.

Each challenge she suffers in life adds to Enriqueta's charisma as a leader who can understand the devotees' pains and problems. And each success reinforces the message that *la Santa*'s power, as well as her son's, is present and efficacious. *La Madrina* also presents herself as a 'political' hero who fights for freedom of expression and against corruption both in Mexican politics and in the Church.

Comparative remarks on the two locations

We argue that the Tepito and Tultitlán altars are the most important and emblematic to explain tradition, innovation, and syncretism in *Santa Muerte*'s devotion. Here we will sum up their differences and similarities, focussing in particular on comparison with other female warden-run shrines in Tepito. The comparison with David Romo's temple is, as we have observed, already an explicit part of the narrative promoted by Jonathan and, later, by his mother.

At the altar in *calle Alfarería*, *doña* Queta Romero does not define herself as a *Madrina* or as a leader of the devotees. She does not have plans for its future even though she has been the first person to run a public altar, and the most recognised and popular altar keeper in Mexico and, indeed, the

world. Analogous observations hold for the less visible and vocal *doña Blanca* at the aforementioned oratory of *Santa Esperanza*. Whereas, as we have seen, Enriqueta Vargas from Tultitlán is building an international reputation and has a clear plan to unify devotees, altars, and associations under her *Santa Muerte Internacional* organisation, which entails the creation of some kind of hierarchies and institutionalisation. When we asked about her plans for *Santa Muerte Internacional*, Enriqueta Vargas with no hesitation answered:

You know, everything I say usually happens for real! I've the feeling that the worship will grow stronger and stronger because I have many plans in mind. It will turn into the biggest cult in the world and I will have a group of the *Santa Muerte* in every corner of the country. You'll see.

Moreover, *doña Queta* is the keeper of the Tepito altar, not a master of ceremonies, while Enriqueta Vargas is a leader and a preacher who celebrates rituals, weddings and baptisms. Enriqueta Vargas' desire for innovation and differentiation is also manifest and relates to her ambition she wants Tultitlán ceremonies to be the best ones:

It is obvious that I'd like people to say that they like to come to my altar because of my way of reciting prayers [...] I always try to give the best, to gain devotees' appreciation.

Tepito's altar has, however, still played a pioneering role and the devotion there developed as a spontaneous practice and as part of an evolution of previous social dynamics that eventually consolidated a community and a collective identity (Lewis 1964: 638–40). The sense of belonging and the creation of social connections are fundamental in Tepito. At Enriqueta Vargas' temple in Tultitlán, people feel identified and accepted by the *Madrina* and the other habitués; however, the flow of devotees is considerably smaller than in Tepito. Thus, the *Madrina* efficiently complements rituals and ceremonies held at her shrine with a presence on social networks and in the press, thereby compensating the lack of geographical centrality and the scarce participation in Sundays' *oraciones* (prayers). The *guardiana* in Tepito, albeit criticising the Catholic Church and its corruption, still defines herself a Catholic. Enriqueta Vargas does not. Instead, she emphasises the novelty of Tultitlán ceremonies against the tradition of established religions (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Neo-Pentecostalism) and other *Santa Muerte* altars (Figures 15.4).

Nowadays, in Tultitlán, some influences from *santería* or *brujería* (sorcery) rituals have been totally banished from the ceremonies, although Jonathan claimed in his books that he was deeply influenced by them. The exchange of gifts and small objects and simulacra, a fundamental moment



Figure 15.4 Panthera's shrine in Tultitlán (Photograph by Fabrizio Lorusso).

in the worship in Tepito, are almost non-existent. However, the *limpia*, or spiritual purification, that is also reminiscent of *santería*, is commonly practised because, as Enriqueta Vargas stated, in our interview, “it is an ancient practice dating back to our ancestors.” Recently, in Tultitlán, the idea of a direct relationship between death and nature has become more and more popular, and there are many attempts to embellish the figure of the Saint with natural elements. All this fulfils a symbolic function strictly related to the specific vicissitudes of the Temple in Tultitlán: by bringing back the pre-Hispanic origins of the devotion, and by associating it with natural elements, the *Madrina* cleanses the black clothes of the Saint from all impurities.

Other innovations fostered by Enriqueta Vargas are the insertion of (alleged) pre-Hispanic elements in the iconography and the rituals of *Santa Muerte* as well as face-to-face dialogue between her and the devotees, to whom she explains directly ‘the message’ of the *Santa*. She also promotes her narrative in writing, whereas Enriqueta Romero never wrote a book about her story. The shop in Tepito is actually the entrance hall to Enriqueta Romero’s home and very modest. Tepito sellers form a dynamic and disseminated informal market. In Tultitlán people can only find Vargas’ shop and another small store nearby. The ceremonial space in Tultitlán is also private and this allows *la Madrina* to enforce rules, such as the prohibition of drugs, that wouldn’t be (and are not) fully respected at Tepito.

Conclusion

We propose that flexibility is the secret of the devotion's success (Flores-Martos 2008). What is happening in Mexico can be considered part of a 'religious mutation' taking place throughout Latin America, in which major shifts in traditional social structures and the multiplication of new religious movements are intertwined (Bastian, Jean-Pierre 1997: 7–18). It is common to find Mexicans who call themselves Catholic praying at the altars of popular saints opposed by the Church, such as Malverde; *Niño Fidencio*; Juan Soldado; San Pancho Villa; and Santa de Cabora (Gil Olmos 2010: 153–82) or lining up to receive the *limpia* (spiritual purification) by a *brujo* (warlock). Antagonism and cooperation among different altars generated innovation, imitation, and syncretism; together with media attention and word-of-mouth information, it has all contributed to the diffusion of the devotion.

Most elements in Tultitlán seem to conform to the general attributes of the devotion: the syncretism, the symbolism of colours, the typology of miracles attributed to *la Santa Muerte*, the kind of people who attend the Temple, and their needs and wishes. However, some creative variations that marked its specific identity were introduced by the founder, such as the aforementioned ritual of bringing in and burying the 'broken *Santas*' statuettes.

Jonathan's assassination was unexpected and devastating: the hierarchy was beheaded, the reputation of the leader was tainted, and the community was shaken by an event that seemingly demonstrated *la Santa's* non-existence, or at least her powerlessness. Showing unusual fortitude and entrepreneurial skills, Enriqueta Vargas has managed to produce a powerful counter-narrative and to perform efficacious actions that have turned a seemingly ineluctable decline into a renewal of the devotion. Devotion that has acquired an even more distinct identity in Tultitlán.

[Update. The present chapter was completed in 2016. On 19 December 2018 Mexican media outlets, soon followed by international ones, broke the news of Enriqueta Vargas Ortiz's death the day before because of pneumonia after having suffered from cancer for a few years].

Notes

- 1 The authors are grateful to Enriqueta Vargas Ortiz, for her interviews and the warm welcome at the Temple; we also wish to thank doña Enriqueta Romero and señora Blanca.
- 2 Researchers have recorded the existence of at least 300 altars in all of Mexico (see Ruiz 2011).
- 3 One of them is conserved at the Brooklyn Museum of New York: <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/156928>
- 4 Interview with Enriqueta Vargas, 24 April 2016.
- 5 See for instance: Barrera Aguirre and Juan Manuel (2008).
- 6 The unspecified 'business' was also mentioned in our personal interview.

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All URLs were accessed on 5 June 2020.

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1 Radical changes in minority religions: reflections

Beth Singler

As an anthropologist, I try to be reflexive about how I engage with my field and my informants. I also try to think about how I first encountered that field and what my first apprehensions of it were. For instance, when it comes to new religious movements, most of my earliest encounters were with forms of Paganism. Specifically, I read the words above, from the *Spiral Dance* written by Starhawk the Pagan author, and they shaped both my understanding that there could even be such a thing as a *new religious movement*, as well as the importance of ‘change’ to them all.

I first came across these words in a reprint of Starhawk’s 1979 book, *The Spiral Dance*, and then again in her 1993 novel inspired by the same ideas, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Years of interest in Pagan movements then led me to a dissertation on Wicca during my undergraduate degree, and then into research on digital spirituality, first as a postgraduate looking at the New Age Movement, New Religious Movements and the Internet, and then as a post-doctoral researcher specialising in the communities and conceptions of Artificial Intelligence. Change has also been a key aspect of my own life story, not only as I focussed on different topics in ‘New Religious Studies’ over the years but also as I had moved back into academia after working in the film industry in the UK.

Change then, I have always thought, is inherent to the nature of new religious movements. Even if we do not adopt change as a theistic concept as Starhawk and other Pagans might, change exists as soon as a new religious movement emerges or is founded. Change also occurs when an individual chooses to convert to a new religious movement and accept its tenets; a move which might also be seen as radical by friends and family or by their existing religious community. Change occurs when members leave movements for any number of reasons, or when the numbers leaving results in the end to the movement. Change is present when the new religious movement receives new revelations from its source of spiritual knowledge and enacts them within the practices of that group. Change happens when societal pressures are exerted onto the new religious movement, and they chose either to become more insular or to engage with the outside world and become more open and accessible. Temporal change also brings new

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issues for new religious movements; founders age and die, new members are born or convert and bring with them the ideas and skills of different generations, and technology changes and advances and provides opportunities and threats.

In the previous volume on change in minority religions, my co-editor Eileen Barker wrote a comprehensive introduction to the volume and to the area that laid out definitions for ‘new religious movement’, as well as for ‘revisionism’ and ‘diversification’: types of change we might see within NRMs. ‘New religious movement’ is not a term without contention and is itself changeable in focus and meaning. Barker identifies the main aspects of an NRM as a religious group that is often predominantly first generation, involves a leadership with charismatic authority, and that expresses alternative beliefs to the mainstream religious views of the context. Although, with regard to demographics, Barker does also recognise that many contributions to that volume involve discussion of change taking place because of the influence of second and third generations—something that also came up in the contributions to this volume.

On the definition of ‘new religious movement’, debate about what constitutes a ‘religion’ has also taken note of the ideological aspect of naming (or not naming) something as a religion. Groups such as the Pagan Federation, Scientology, and some Jedi temples have attempted – some through legal means – to be identified as religions for the greater legitimacy that might bring (see Richardson and Barker 2020, also in this Inform/Routledge series). Whereas some other groups try very hard *not* to be labelled a ‘religion’ – as the word for them denotes rigid, unchanging, doctrine, and hierarchy and is contrary to how they perceive themselves. Personally, I have seen this response in some AI focussed movements, for instance the Turing Church, who prefer to call themselves ‘un-religions’ to denote that they are disrupting and exploiting, or ‘hacking’, traditional ideas, including religion itself, and putting their aspects to work often for transhumanist aims (Singler 2020). Even with these issues in mind, ‘new religious movements’ still works as a legitimate object of study, as well as a signifier of an academic objectivity that the increasingly pejorative ‘cult’ does not. Perhaps in the future, we will see change again in naming and in who sees themselves as new religious movements scholars.

When it comes to change *within* new religious movements, the terms ‘revisionism’ and ‘diversification’ highlight important structural and relational aspects of the process. Of the former, Barker explained it as ‘a significant departure from an authoritative or generally accepted doctrine, theory, or practice’ (Barker 2013, 2). As a ‘re-vision’, a new way of seeing or a seeing again, revisionism could be applied to the creation of any new religious movement against the contemporary situation or context. Even within new religious movements such moments of revelation can in some cases lead to schismatic groups that claim to be entirely separate from their original movement. Revisionism can also involve reconsidering existing

ideas and practices and can involve making a claim for a return to how things were meant to be at the foundation of the group. As explored in several chapters in this volume, revisionism can also occur to reform the new religious movement, to make it appear more in line with contemporary society, and thus more legitimate.

Barker's definition of 'diversification' in her introduction to the previous volume also introduced and highlighted the difference between horizontal and vertical diversification. While diversity exists between and within in all religious movements, deviation from existing tenets can lead to schism when individual believers 'select and lay weight on different aspects of any belief system' (Barker 2013, 6). This is a *horizontal* diversification. *Vertical* diversification – variations in beliefs between layers of a movement's vertical hierarchy – is also often found: 'It is quite common for an inner circle of elites to be privy to esoteric knowledge about which rank-and-file members are ignorant' (Barker 2013, 5). Barker uses the example of Scientology here, which is well known for staggering initiation into knowledge along the 'Bridge to Total Freedom', with higher levels, and deeper knowledge, accessible through paid-for courses. Knowledge of the ultimate aims and goals of the movement can also be limited to a select few. Change can come about when such knowledge is breached and disseminated, or when new pockets of dissent come up with their own alternative 'elite' knowledge. Freezone Scientology is an example of a schismatic formation that sees itself as expressing the openness of knowledge Scientology's founder intended (Lewis 2014).

The contributors to this volume have shared their elite, but unhidden, knowledge and research expertise to discuss modern movements. A wide variety of groups have been considered, including the Plymouth Brethren, ISKCON, Heathenry, Gnosticism, Druidry, and Jediism. We also have chapters from legal experts, as well as sociologists applying knowledge gained from studying new religious movements to other movements. In one case, we have a response to a chapter from members of the group discussed – the PBCC writing in response to Doherty and Dyason's chapter. Again, as in the previous volume, we are pleased to see the writers continuing in the spirit of the Inform seminars that have inspired these volumes, with non-polemical contributions that add to the scholarly body of work on new religious movements. 'Methodological agnosticism' is also their shared approach. Defined by Barker as an approach which,

does not deny the truth or assert the falsity of non-empirical beliefs; it merely acknowledges that the social sciences have no techniques or expertise with which they can judge or evaluate supernatural claims, although they will try to describe these and their consequences as accurately as possible. (Barker 2013, 11)

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This volume is divided into four thematic parts that address different origins for radical change: interactions with society, technology and institutions, efforts at legitimation, and new revelations.

Interactions with society leading to radical change

Eileen Barker's chapter considers how minority religions change in response to cases of child sexual abuse within their communities. Her chapter places such radical changes in a larger contemporary context that includes exposures of abuse and 'cover-ups' by other, more mainstream, groups such as established, traditional, religions. Barker's argument is that social or cultural structures within a movement can obscure abuses and obstruct change, but that that culture can itself be changed by individuals who choose to do something. Her primary cases of such change in the light of internal abuses are ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), the Children of God (later known as The Family International), and the Jesus Fellowship (at times known as the Jesus Army).

In his chapter on contemporary Heathenism, Karl Seigfried lays out the relations between different groups of Ásatrú, a reimagining of 'pre-Christian Germanic religion with an emphasis on medieval Icelandic texts'. The evolution of perspectives between these different groups lies in part upon their changing attitudes towards ancestry. For some groups, the emphasis on ancestry has led them into a more exclusive, even racist, stance against those outside their claimed ethnic origin. Seigfried examines three approaches to ancestry, some more inclusive than others, and lays out the development and changes within groups from the original sparks of inspiration that rebirthed the 'Viking' religion in the current era.

Writing as someone who directly experienced the changes in the EnlightenNext movement and the changeable, and sometimes volatile, nature of Andrew Cohen himself, André Van Der Braak's chapter provides an account of internal vertical change within to a hierarchical system. Cohen is introduced as a product of the 'guru phenomenon' that began in the 1900s with the Victorian interest in, and translation of, the Indian traditions. Cohen is, however, a home-grown guru, and his revisions of the concept of 'Enlightenment' have echoes in the naming, structure, and fractures within his movement between its founding and its decline. 'Enlightenment', a translation of traditional Indian concepts and words seen in Hinduism and Buddhism, is put to use in Western consciousness movements to various ends, and Van Der Braak's chapter expounds on Cohen's own 'Evolutionary Enlightenment' and how 'his various revisions of the notion of enlightenment also served to facilitate the legitimization of the increasing occurrence of several forms of verbal and physical violent behaviour within the community'. The chapter is a frank exploration of charismatic leadership and how it can fail its followers.

Jonathan Woolley's chapter pays attention to the role of newer rituals in ameliorating, or not, tensions between generational cohorts in British Druidry. While claiming sympathies with the druidism of millennia before, contemporary Druidry is actually much younger, and it is still changing its approach towards dealing with the newer generations that are either being born into the movement or finding their way there. Woolley's chapter unpicks the influence of classical tropes that have shaped current conceptions of these two generations – the wise old Druid, and the youthful apprentice figure – and uses ethnographic material to understand how these archetypes and evolving rituals based upon them have not fully dealt with inter-generational issues.

Technology and institutions

The Brazilian new religious movement of Santo Daime draws on a conflux of influences in its 'works', or rituals: 'the pragmatic supernaturalism of the popular Catholic, Amazonian-folk (caboclo) and Afro-Brazilian elements', according to Andrew Dawson's chapter on the evolution or 'progress' of such works. Dawson expounds on Santo Daime's dual foci: external regime and interior self-betterment. Both of which are centred on the ritualised consumption of ayahuasca. Changes in the movement have come about in part due to transnational diaspora and transcultural appropriation, with the Brazilian movement gaining followers internationally since the late 1980s. Becoming an international movement has drawn greater attention to the role of ayahuasca in the works and to legal implications, played out in various nations and states. Dawson lays out three primary transformations associated with Santo Daime's 'progressively transnational profile': repertorial diversity and eclecticism, organisational differentiation, and ritual reconfiguration.

Shai Feraro's chapter surveying two decades of British Paganism pays specific attention to the role played by publications in bringing about change after the foundation and growth of more hierarchical modes of Paganism, such as Gardnerian Wicca in the 1950s and 1960s. Feraro explores how such publications were not just a space for sharing material and information about events, but also a location for the rise and development of the feminist and ecological discourses that changed the wider Pagan milieu of the 1970s–1980s. Using the magazine *Wood and Water* as a case study, Feraro's chapter details the development of the burgeoning Pagan community in the UK and the tensions and changes that took place. The feminist turn in Paganism benefitted from such technologies, while also being a part of an ecological shift that critiqued technology and led to visible activism. Empowered by magical thinking, such activism sought to change the world.

My chapter considers what happens when an external force causes a change in the primary source material that an NRM has been using for its

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beliefs. In the case of the real-world Jedi, I discuss whether a change in ownership of the intellectual property that had initially inspired their movement – the Star Wars films and the Extended Universe founded upon them – has had any effect on the believers and their beliefs. Interviewing Jedi from various different temples and groups, I found that for many the ‘canon’ of the Star Wars Universe was merely starting point. But further, I argue that the nature of fandom itself encouraged a rhetoric of difference to the source material and indifference to its revision. Change, I show, was an integral part to the movement before the collapse in canon material and was present even before the Jedi came to the attention of the public through the 2001 UK Census.

Seeking legitimacy in the face of outside forces

Amongst the external forces that can bring about change in NRMs we must include legislative decisions, with their repercussions for legitimacy and even religious freedoms. Cranmer and Sandberg’s chapter on this begins with the knotty problem of the Church of Scientology for whom the question of whether they are a legitimate religion, and as an entity capable of holding religious services, has played out in various cases around the world. Focussing on the UK legislature, this chapter also takes in cases brought under the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006. Cases wherein the rights to minority religious expression were discussed, and such groups have had to try to prove their legitimacy against fixed criteria. How minority movements shift and change under such measurement is of continuing relevance.

Bernard Doherty and Laura Dyason introduce us to a period of fourteen years in the existence of the Exclusive Brethren in Australia during which the group ‘rebranded’ as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC). This, they discuss, was a part of a larger change in the nature of the group as Bruce D. Hales took over after the passing of his father, John S. Hales. Changes this chapter describe include attempts at reconciliation with former members, political campaigning, charity work, a more open attitude to the adoption of technology, and allowing the movement’s youth access to higher education. One important question raised in this chapter is whether to understand these changes as a rebranding for a veneer of legitimacy or as a more genuine revisionism (or neither), and Doherty and Dyason provide the views of former members who lived through this time of rapprochement and reform. This chapter is followed by a response from the PBCC themselves, providing an account of these changes from an insider perspective.

David Robertson’s chapter on Samael Aun Weor’s Universal Christian Gnostic Movement (UCGM) introduces us to a group founded in 1976 on the idea of the restoration of primitive Christian practice, but which has actually been moulded by influences from 19th-century Rosicrucian groups

such as the Order Templis Orientalis (OTO). The OTO itself grew out of Freemasonry, sexual magic, and Western accounts of Tantra that were being brought over from India by curious Victorians. Robertson's chapter traces two aspects of the UGCM that became more and more distinct over time: a push towards legitimacy as a mainstream Christian movement and a parallel shift into New Age spirituality, at a time when the Internet was enabling the growth of such movements into countries wary of more dominant forms of Christianity. Diversification and change have come about for this movement as they have faced the external pressures of fitting into a changing context.

Shanon Shah applies ideas and frames from the study of new religious movements to the evolution of a British-based LGBT Muslim group in Chapter 13. Change in this instance comes about both because of external pressures from expectations of the Islamic response to homosexuality and because of internal tensions and relationships within the group itself. Shah's consideration through an NRM lens also allows him to illuminate the changes and innovations in theological thinking in the group; ideas that spring from the social context of the group and its relation to other Muslim groups and established belief. This approach may well be fruitful for considering radical change in other groups with ties to official religious thinking but with their own foci.

The role of new revelations in radical change

Claire Borowik's chapter examines the Family International, discussing a period after that discussed in Eileen Barker's chapter. She explains how, in 2010, this counter-cultural fringe movement faced a 'organisational overhaul'. This was a more comprehensive change than previous shifts of emphasis and structure. The official documents outlining the changes described this 'Reboot' as 'an expediency in order to meet new goals of evangelisation and membership expansion'. Prophecy declined in importance after the 'Reboot' in the light of increasing emphasis on the Bible, with the work of contemporary Protestant theologians coming to be used in the community. Previous 'unorthodox' sexual practices have also been occluded in the official texts as legitimacy is sought by the movement according to Borowik. Radical change has come about through a repositioning of the movement in the mainstream and a change in perspective on prophecy.

For a chapter on the Saint of Death herself, it is perhaps not surprising that change in Chapter 15 comes about for the Santa Muerte movement in Tultitlán, Mexico, after the death of one of its leading figures. Stefano Bigliardi, Fabrizio Lorusso, and Stefano Morrone employ ethnographic methods to examine the communities and temple groups arising around Santa Muerte before and after the death of Jonathan Vargas, whose mother

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has continued to tell his spiritual story and to lead an international organisation, sharing Santa Muerte across the globe. What is happening with the group is proposed to be a ‘religious mutation’ by Bigliardi, Lorusso, and Morrone, a part of a wider shift in Latin America, producing new religious movements and altering existing social structures. Santa Muerte, in the examples of the two temples, is a reminder in its own focus of the temporal and changing nature of all things.

Eugene Gallagher (Chapter 16) explores how claims to transcendental authority in a changing movement are employed to legitimate decisions. His particular case-study, the Church of Satan and its offshoot the Temple of Set, expands on the use of revelation in particular and explores the role of charismatic authority. He points out a shift in claims; when the Church was founded by Anton Szandor LaVey there was no recall to supernatural intervention, instead he claimed ‘insight’ rather than ‘intervention’. However,

by basing his authority on insight rather than revelation and by portraying himself as the first among equals, LaVey left wide open the possibility that someone would claim equal if not superior authority. Just such a claim animated the first major schism within the Church of Satan.

Gallagher details the revisionism that came out of Michael Aquino’s claims to revelation and his foundation of the Temple of Set as a more kemitic-focussed group.

Erin Prophet’s chapter on the groups that evolved out of the I AM movement, such as the current Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT), examines the role of the ‘messengers’ in such groups influenced by Theosophical and New Thought ideas. In particular, she draws attention to the role of ‘messengership’ in CUT in expressing charismatic authority, legitimacy, and in responding to internal and external changes and pressures on the groups. Prophet writes from personal experience, as she was the daughter of the movement’s founders, and she was in training to become a ‘messenger’ herself, for six years. This gives her direct knowledge with which to discuss how changes in levels of exclusivity, in responses to questions of evil and soteriology, and in understandings of personal responsibility have transformed these movements. She is clear that when revealed messages fail to meet contemporary expectations, we see either schism and change or steadfastness and decline.

Change and the academic

This volume comes seven years after the previous one, and many changes in the lives of its two co-editors explain why it took time to come into being. Eileen and I began discussing putting together a follow-up volume to *Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements* when we

were both speaking on panels at the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) conference in Erfurt in 2015. I was just a PhD student back then; it was in 2016 that I completed my PhD and started my first post-doc, moving onto a research project thinking about the questions raised by Artificial Intelligence. While I still applied frameworks from my PhD anthropological work on the New Age movement, as well as research done on new religious movements such as Jediism and Scientology, my day to day work was often shaped by the concerns of the principal investigators on the project. Likewise, Eileen found herself increasingly involved again with Inform after its funding changed and diminished, long after officially retiring in 2003 (she had worked without pay for Inform since founding it in 1988). While we pulled the volume together contributors dropped out, were replaced, and changed their proposed plans. None of this is offered as an excuse for the length of time this edited volume has taken, but in recognition of the role played by change in the development of the volume itself. Revelations and prophecy have perhaps not been of much influence, but certainly our own social situations, demographics, external pressures, technological needs and developments, and internal diversification and diversity have played a role in the life span of this project.

Even now, as I sit at my kitchen table writing this introduction to the volume, working from home and home-schooling my son during the tail end of the UK's first lockdown due to the coronavirus global pandemic, I am encountering changing circumstances. The world outside has become quieter in some ways as we have learnt to socially distance ourselves, while (rightfully) louder in others, as the Black Live Matter movement has responded vocally to yet more police violence and racism. These external events are a reminder to us of quite how much new religious movements are a product of their time, and how religion also plays a role in framing responses to radical changes in society. Lockdown has been for some, a moment of quiet, almost ascetic reflection. Others have loudly discussed their right not to be locked down or be-masked, pulling on versions of Christianity closer to national civic religion as they debate their freedoms. Religious movements still attempting to go ahead with large-scale religious rituals, such as funerals or large, charismatic, meetings, have been thwarted or experienced painful consequences. An increase in doing religion online has led to questions about how ritual and sacraments are done virtually, adding to an older discussion within religious groups that scholars who pay attention to digital religion have been observing for decades already. In all, religion is shaped by its age; change emerges as the world continues to change. This volume is a contribution to the study of specific new religious movements, as well as a contribution to our overall awareness of the nature and varieties of change itself.

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