
THIRD MILLENNIUM NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN BRITAIN

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Trends in British NRMs

At the 2010 CESNUR conference in Torino it was suggested that participants might offer an account of the development of new religious movements (NRMs) in their country from around 1995 to the present day. This presentation explores the development of NRMs in Britain during this period, giving particular attention to the Open Episcopal Church as a case study that raises a variety of questions about the field of NRM studies.

In an age of globalisation, it is difficult to write about new religious movements by country. The vast majority of NRMs in Britain are international organisations, and key events in their history have affected the organisation globally rather than nationally. If one considers the main events that have taken place within NRMs, they do not seem to affect Britain any differently from the rest of the world. Most NRMs have an international and not merely a national presence, and hence follow international trends. For example, the Family International and the Jehovah's Witnesses have undergone substantial restructuring. The changes in the former are more visible to members than the latter: in the case of the Witnesses, the obvious changes relate to the timings of meetings, while The Family International has rescinded its Charter, and has seen a substantial reduction in its community living. The Worldwide Church of God and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Community of Christ) have become doctrinally more mainstream. Such changes have affected Britain no more and no less than elsewhere.

NRMs that have taken their rise in Britain now operate on an international scale: the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), New Kadampa Buddhism, the Jesus Fellowship Church (better known publicly as the Jesus Army). The principal reason for the FWBO's name change to Triratna in 2010 was the fact that it had become no longer exclusively western, having had for many years a strong Indian uptake (which went under the different name of Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana, or TBMSG) and branches as far afield as Japan. Likewise, the Jesus Army, although still predominantly a British organisation, has reached Australia and the Far East.

The deaths of founder-leaders has made little different to their organisations. Although their passing has been mourned, institutionalisation is not something that follows on the leader's death, as Weber suggested (Weber, 1978:246-254), but in all cases the leader's advancing years have caused him or her to have relinquish an active role in the organisation's running. In the year 2000 Sangharakshita (the FWBO's founder leader) handed over the leadership to a College of Preceptors — younger, but none the less senior members who had been previously entrusted with responsible leadership roles within the organisation.

Compared with the 1960s and 1970s, there is much less aggressive proselytising. The Unification Church (UC) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) have a much less visible presence on the streets, the former preferring to focus on widening the availability of the Blessing (the marriage ceremony) to those outside the organisation. Even Scientologists are not so prone to approaching members of the public: one can now complete the Free Personality Test (the Oxford Capacity Analysis) online. As NRMs have grown older, so has their membership, and fewer new converts come from the younger population. One senior member of the FWBO confided in me that the organisation was having difficulty in attracting the younger generation. While there is still community living in some of the NRMs, home membership is increasingly more common.

The reasons for the decline in conversion to new religions are matters of speculation. The breakup of the 1960s youth counterculture in Britain and the United States is clearly a factor. Proselytising may have become less aggressive in the wake of public criticism. The socio-political climate fostered by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan may have created a renewed interest in material wealth rather than spiritual seeking. The drive towards encouraging school leavers into universities has militated against 'gap years' and a younger generation encountering religious groups as they travelled the world. However, all these are guesses, and firm answers are difficult.

There remains the phenomenon of the New Age. Although some scholars have contended that the New Age is dead (see, e.g. Sutcliffe, 2003:223-25), there are still psychic fairs, clairvoyants, Tarot readers, and the like. Centres like Glastonbury and Findhorn continue to thrive, book stores have 'Mind Body Spirit' sections which are invariably larger than those devoted to mainstream religion, and the annual Mind Body Spirit Festival continues to be publicised.

Britain's 'new new religions'

There are a few 'new new religions' in Britain, however, although their numbers are not large, and most have received little publicity. The following list, which makes no claim to be exhaustive, gives an indication of the new organisations that have arisen. Most of those listed, though not all, are independent organisations, rather than interest groups within already existing institutions.

- 1994 Church of England (Continuing)
- 1996 Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW)
- 1997 Western Chan Fellowship
- 1998 Church of God (international, 9 countries)
- 1999 Latin Mass Society of Ireland
Reformed Liberal Catholic Church (Old Catholic)
- 2000 Free Church of Scotland (Continuing)
The Rock Church
- 2001 Amazing Grace Church
Anglican Orthodox Church
Buckhead Church
Heralds of the Gospel
Open Episcopal Church
- 2003 The Ark Church (York)
King's Churches (a.k.a. Evangelical Episcopal Church)
Street Pastors
- 2004 Church of Fools
- 2005 Assemblies of God (Ireland)
- 2006 The Young Rite (Western esoteric)
- 2007 Catholic Orthodox Union of SS Peter & Paul
- 2009 Fellowship of Confessing Churches (Church of Scotland)
- 2009 St Pixels

It will be noticed that, with only a couple of exceptions, these are all Christian groups. Several are independent Protestant evangelical organisations, with orthodox trinitarian theology. Others are schismatical groups from the Church of England, collectively known as the Continuing Anglican Movement. Three of the organisations above — the Open Episcopal Church, the Church of Fools, and St Pixels — operate mainly as ‘cyber-churches’.

The Continuing Anglican Movement is largely the result of the three factors in the Church of England in recent times. First, the ordination of women, which was approved in 1992, with the first ordinations in 1994, proved divisive. Second, a number of liturgical changes have taken place since the 1970s, resulting in the widespread abandonment of the Book of Common Prayer (1662). Third, there has been a liberalisation of attitudes to sexual morality, particularly homosexuality, with openly gay clergy being permitted to preside over congregations.

One such organisation in England which emerged in this context is The Church of England (Continuing), established by Bishop David N. Samuel, and which has four branches in England — in London, Reading, Frinton-on-Sea, and Wolverhampton, where the

congregation recently purchased the local synagogue, which had fallen into disuse. Samuel's book *The Church in Crisis* (2004) outlines his misgivings about the 21st-century mainstream Church of England, principally the questioning its abandonment of the authority of the Bible and the Thirty-Nine Articles, the rejection of tradition that is evidenced by the lack of use of the Book of Common Prayer, and the replacement of the King James Version of the Bible with modern translations. The ordination of women and of gay priests is also fiercely attacked.

The Church of Scotland (Continuing) emerged in somewhat different circumstances. A dispute about whether its full General Assembly should require one of its ministers to be put on trial for sexual impropriety led to a senior member of the clergy accusing the Assembly of 'gross and irremedial wickedness and hypocrisy'. The Reverend Maurice Roberts, who made the remark, refused to apologise, and 22 ministers were suspended. The ministers in question also appear to have sought firmer adherence to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), which has traditionally been the denomination's standard of doctrine.

The Open Episcopal Church

In what follows I want to focus on the Open Episcopal Church (OEC), founded in England in 2001. The OEC has an interesting combination of dissent from the mainstream Anglican tradition, coupled with use of the internet as an important means of reaching a wider membership. Unlike the other groups that have formed the Continuing Anglican Movement, however, the OEC is liberal rather than traditionalist.

Jonathan Blake, the organisation's founder, was vicar of a church in Bexleyheath until 1993. He claims to have been well-liked by his congregation, who subsequently turned against him after he had a couple of affairs with members, followed by marital breakdown. He felt that his position had become untenable, not only with his congregation, but with the Church of England more generally. He therefore signed a Deed of Relinquishment the following year. A Deed of Relinquishment is a document that severs one's relationship with the Church of England, making the member of the clergy ineligible for office within the denomination, and ineligible to conduct its sacraments. However, as Blake recognised, although one's license to practise can be rescinded, a priest is a priest for ever, and in Church law his or her sacraments remain valid (that is, they are still genuine sacraments), although not 'legal', since they are unauthorised by one's bishop. Blake therefore planned to start a ministry whereby he would offer the sacraments and other spiritual services as 'Britain's first 'freelance vicar'.

Blake published a book *For God's Sake Don't Go to Church* in 1999. It is part-autobiographical, but it is largely a critique of what Blake perceives as the inadequacies of the church. His main criticism is that it is exclusive, barring outsiders from receiving the

sacraments, and endowing its priests with dictatorial powers of determining who is eligible for life-cycle rites such as baptisms and weddings.

In the same year Blake decided to publicise his concerns further by pinning ‘95 Theses’ — in the style of Martin Luther — to the door of Canterbury Cathedral. He sought permission, which was denied. Understandably the cathedral authorities were unhappy with the prospect of nails, or even drawing pins, being inserted into the ancient west door. Blake suggested that, if this were the problem, he was happy to use Blu-Tack instead. After permission was denied once again, he went ahead with the event, and was arrested. (He was swiftly released.)

Eager to gain the support of other disaffected clergy, Blake placed an advertisement in the *Church Times* in 1999, inviting those interested in his envisaged ministry to contact him. As a result, over 100 people got in touch, including Bishop Richard Palmer, a former bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church.¹ On 1 January 2000 the Society for Independent Christian Ministry (SICM) was formally inaugurated, and its first ordinations took place that year. On 30 March 2000, Jonathan’s ministry was reaffirmed by the laying on of hands by all the attendees — bishops, priests and ministers. On 9 December 2000 Bishop Palmer ordained him priest, and the following day he was consecrated bishop. In the same year, two further groups attached themselves to SICM: Anglicans with catholic leanings who sought episcopal ordination, and evangelicals who were concerned about the liberalisation of homosexuality. A third figure in the formation of the OEC was the Rev Michael Wilson, an evangelical who had worked as an independent clergyman, and who founded The Order of On Call Clergy. The OEC was to be ‘Open to all without exception, loving, serving, accessible and relevant to our age.’

Bishop Jonathan recounts that on New Year’s Eve 2000 he decided not to attend a Midnight Mass in a mainstream church. Instead, he went to Leicester Square with communion utensils, bread and wine. He borrowed a table from a local restaurant owner, and set it up as a makeshift altar. Anyone was invited to receive the sacrament, whoever they were, irrespective of age, social status, ethnicity or even religion. He then proceeded to go round the streets of Soho, offering the sacrament to the homeless and to prostitutes. The Open Episcopal Church, he intended, should be truly open to all.

Controversies arose in the organisation’s early days, however. There was disagreement about whether the church should be governed by a single primate or a college of bishops. Other grounds of dissent related to the liturgy: some clergy had attached themselves to the OEC because they favoured a more traditional approach to worship, while Blake and others favoured a more free, experimental liturgy, which could be adapted for the specific needs of the worshippers.

Blake has made a point of conducting unorthodox religious services to meet the needs of the participants. He recounts that his first baptism as an OEC bishop was at the summit of Mount Snowdon in Wales. Other baptisms have taken place in pubs, gardens and people’s

flats. On one occasion he conducted a baptism in a circus ring, where the ceremony was attended by clowns, trapeze artists, and even an elephant. On Valentine's Day (14 February) 2001, Blake conducted a 'gay wedding' live on television, when he appeared on Independent Television's breakfast show, *This Morning*, and 'married' Neil Morris and Mark Jinks (BBC, 2001). In 2009, Blake attracted further media publicity when he conducted the wedding blessing of Jade Goody and Jack Tweed. Goody was a participant in the British reality TV show *Big Brother*, but was later diagnosed as having terminal cancer: she wanted her marriage to have a religious blessing before she died. To those who think that such ceremonies are bizarre, Blake cites the doctrine of the Incarnation — the notion that God enters into the human situation, and is 'being found near us and in us and around us' (Blake 1999:142).

The day the 'gay wedding', the *Daily Mail* published a report of the event, in which the journalist referred to Blake as a 'self styled bishop', adding, 'The one thing that surprised me about this disgusting event was that the producers couldn't find a real bishop to do it' (cited in Blake, 2011). Blake took legal action against the newspaper, and received the judgement that, while a court of law could not determine the legitimacy of a bishopric, his claim to office was not 'self styled', since he was consecrated by Bishop Richard Palmer, and could claim a succession in the Old Catholic tradition.

In 2008 Blake inaugurated a new venture: his Post the Host service. Post the Host aims to make the eucharist accessible to all. Online worship has encountered the problem of the extent to which it can replicate conventional worship, and indeed whether it is desirable that it should do so. One previous experiment was the Church of Fools, originally sponsored by the Methodist Church, but discontinued for lack of funding. Their cyber-services were in effect conventional services when online attendees participated simply by keying in 'Amen' after prayers, or keying in the words of hymns as they were sung. No sacraments were available: indeed, the celebration of sacraments and rites of passage has proved problematic, since they seem to require bodily participation. One cannot baptize over the internet, and it is questionable whether it is possible to consecrate eucharistic elements by a priest or a minister pronouncing the words of institution at a different location from that of the worshipper. Blake has attempted to solve this problem by enabling participants to order communion wafers and communion wine which he has already consecrated. The enquirer is asked to supply his or her personal details, the quantity of hosts required, and brief information about how he or she intends to use them. On receipt of these items, the communicant can then go online and select one of Blake's Masses. One can either use the text that is supplied on www.postthehost.net or else one can watch one of his YouTube videos, selecting from a conventional Mass, an open air Mass, a street Mass, a Latin Mass, a Pentecost Mass (in tongues), among several others.

There is little doubt that the baptisms and Masses that Blake conducts in person, often in these unusual situations are 'valid', since they have the right 'form', 'matter' and 'intention'.² Whether an online sacrament is a valid sacrament, even if the host has been pre-consecrated, is a question that remains unresolved. From the standpoint of mainstream

Christianity, however, Blake's ordination and sacramental ministry remain illegal, being unauthorised by the Church of England. Nonetheless, the Open Episcopal Church has succeeded in wider recognition: in 2008 it gained acceptance by admission to the International Council of Churches, and to Churches Uniting in Christ — both ecumenical organisations — and subsequently to the World Council of Churches. Such membership does not legitimate the OEC's sacraments, but rather signals its credentials as 'a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (World Council of Churches 2006).

Some final reflections

The Continuing Anglican Movement raises a number of important points for the study of new religious movements. First, it highlights an area of religious activity which perhaps NRM scholars are not so accustomed to study. NRM studies have tended to focus on groups with unorthodox beliefs, syncretistic ideas or independent identities, rather than schismatical organisations that claim to maintain a continued orthodoxy. Second, the Continuing Anglican Movement appears to run counter to Weber's theory about the development of religions, namely that they begin with charismatic leadership, undergo 'routinisation', then institutionalisation. The 'sect' is inherently something that is born out of schism, and hence the institution must precede the inception of the new religion. It may be argued that schism constitutes a fourth stage of Weber's scheme. It is a common feature, occurring in new religions as well as traditional ones: the Unification Church, ISKCON, the Church of Scientology, and several others, have all experienced schism. One important point that is illustrated by the Open Episcopal Church is the problem of organising and mobilising those who are disaffected by a traditional form of religion. Blake recognised the importance of acquiring support for a controversial breakaway movement from the Church of England. However, his *Church Times* advertisement attracted responses from supporters who were disaffected for different and, as became apparent, conflicting reasons. Those who believe, in common with Blake, that the Church of England is insufficiently inclusive are uneasy allies with those who oppose women's ordination, those who want a return to the 1662 prayer book, or those who believe that the Church is unduly liberal towards homosexuality.

Finally, the Open Episcopal Church raises important issues about what is and is not possible to accomplish in cyberspace. The OEC does more than use the internet for publicising and promoting its ideas, but it seeks to innovate in ways that surpass previous attempts to create cyber-spirituality such as the Church of Fools and St Pixels. Like the rest of Blake's ministry, it remains controversial, and its value and legitimacy will no doubt be determined by public demand and by the stance that other Christian denominations will take towards such endeavours.

Endnotes

¹ The Liberal Catholic Church was founded by James Ingall Wedgwood (1883-1951), who was succeeded by the Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater in 1923. A number of NRM leaders have been members of the Liberal Catholic Church, including George King (Aetherius Society) and Luc Jouret of the Order of the Solar Temple.

² For a discussion of these criteria of validity and the distinction between 'valid' and 'legal' sacraments, see Chryssides and Wilkins (2011):166-69.

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