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Eileen Barker¹²*Freedom for me and, perhaps, you –
but surely not them?**Attitudes to new religions in
contemporary democracies*

Abstract. Throughout history, new religious movements (NRMs) have been treated with suspicion and fear. Although contemporary democracies do not throw members of NRMs to the lions or burn them at the stake, they have ways and means of making it clear that pluralism and freedom of religion have their limits. The limits to pluralism are evident enough in countries such as Saudi Arabia or North Korea that have regimes stipulating that citizens must adhere exclusively to their one and only True religion or ideology. Limitations to pluralism have also been manifest in countries such as Northern Nigeria, Sri Lanka or Myanmar (Burma), where terrorists have used violence to eliminate religions other than their own. Even otherwise peaceful democracies – that have signed the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and other statements affirming freedom of belief (and non-belief) for all – can discriminate against religions, especially the new religious movements in their midst, and this they do in a variety of ways [Richardson 1994; Lindholm 2004; Kirkham 2013]. This paper outlines, from the perspective of a sociologist of religion, some of the ways in

which such attitudes toward, and treatment of, NRMs can demonstrate more subtle, but nevertheless marked and serious limitations to freedom, even in societies that pride themselves on their progressive and inclusive approach to diversity.

Key words: NRM, freedom of religion, diversity, pluralism

Айлін Баркер*Свобода для мене і, можливо, для
вас - але, звичайно, не для них?**Ставлення до нових релігій у
сучасних демократіях*

Анотація. Протягом історії до нових релігійних рухів ставилися з підозрою і страхом. Хоча сучасні демократії не кидають членів нових релігійних течій (НРТ) левам і не спалюють їх на вогнищі, у них є способи та засоби, які дають зрозуміти, що плюралізм і свобода релігії мають свої межі. Межі плюралізму досить очевидні в таких країнах, як Саудівська Аравія чи Північна Корея, в яких існують режими, які передбачають, що громадяни повинні дотримуватися виключно своєї єдиної істинної релігії чи ідеології. Обмеження плюралізму також виявилися в таких країнах, як Північна Нігерія, Шрі-Ланка чи М'янма (Бірма), де терористи застосовували насильство для ліквідації релігій, відмінних від їхньої власної. Навіть мирні демократії – підписанти Загальної декларації прав людини ООН, Європейської конвенції з прав

пише про так звані секти, критикує дискримінаційні закони (які чи ідеї яких з'являються в різних країнах), відстоюючи права і свободи людей, незалежно від їх віросповідання.

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людини та інші заяви, що підтверджують свободу переконань (і невіру) для всіх - можуть дискримінувати релігії, особливо НРТ, і це вони роблять різними способами. У цьому матеріалі викладено, з точки зору соціолога релігії, деякі способи, якими подібне ставлення до нових рухів та поведіння з ними можуть продемонструвати більш тонкі, але тим не менш помітні та серйозні обмеження свободи, навіть у суспільствах, які пишуться своїм прогресивним та всеохоплюючим підходом до релігійної різноманітності.

Ключові слова: НРТ, свобода релігії, різноманіття, плюралізм

State Reactions to Minority Religions. When the Berlin wall came down in 1989, the celebrations for democracy and freedom resounded throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and, after decades of state-imposed atheism, freedom of religion was among the most welcomed of the changes. However, the honeymoon was soon over, and the traditional religions - be they the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria and Romania, or the Catholic Churches of Poland, Croatia and Hungary - complained vociferously about foreign religions taking away their flock. The spiritual lives of people, they claimed, rightly belonged to them, the religions that had protected the culture and traditions of the society not only throughout the Soviet period but also throughout the centuries [Barker 1997: 25-62]. Politicians were urged to introduce laws restricting the incursion of foreign religions and, indeed, of indigenous NRMs such as Vissarion's Church of the Last Testament in Siberia [Filanov 1999: 163-184], the New Jerusalem in Romania [Chițimia 1995: 87-98], the White Brotherhood of Peter Deunov in Bulgaria [Kraleva 2001], or the White

Brotherhood of Maria Devi Christ in Ukraine [Shterin 2012: 286-302].

To take an example from Western Europe, the French Republic has, since its 1905 Law on the Separation of Church and State [Loi du 9 décembre 1905], declared itself to be a nation celebrating *laïcité*. In some ways resembling the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, *laïcité* is a situation that reputedly guarantees not only the absence of state involvement in religious affairs, but also the equal treatment of all religions. The French government has, however, commissioned a number of Reports highlighting the problems of *les sectes*. One such Report listed 172 sectarian movements [Guyard 1995], as a consequence of which, group members have found themselves discriminated against in a number of ways, such as loss of employment, being unable to have their children accepted in schools, and/or unable to rent accommodation, including halls in which to meet [Lheureux 2000]. The French government funds, moreover, an Interministerial organisation, MIVILUDES [Mission], which is specifically designed to fight 'cultic deviances' and has contributed to legislation that focuses particularly on the activities of new religious or spiritual movements [Barker 2008; Palmer 201].

A distinction can be drawn between two approaches to pluralism. On the one hand, there are states such as France, Russia or China which declare that they want to protect their citizens from the potential dangers of what the Chinese term *xie jiao* (evil cults) [Zhu 2010: 471-501; Introvigne 2020.], and, to this end, introduced special laws directed towards their movements before they have the opportunity to do harm. On the other hand, states such as the United States of America, Great Britain or the Scandinavian countries adopt the position that all citizens are equal before the law,

whatever their beliefs, and everyone is assumed innocent until, by due process, proven guilty after having committed a criminal offence [Barker 2015]. In other words, states in the former group react to the presence of religions that are perceived to be potentially dangerous before they have actually engaged in any criminal activity, while states in the latter group wait until a law has been broken.

In practice, however, the distinction is not so clear-cut. Even the latter group of countries frequently introduce more subtle ways of ensuring that these religious «others» are not treated equally to an established «us». One such way is if an NRM wants to register as a recognised religion in order to receive special privileges such as tax exemptions, for example, or simply to be able to function as a religion in the country. First, it may have difficulty in persuading authorities that it is a religion [Barker 1994]. The criteria are decidedly selective and applied inconsistently. For example, Buddhism may be accepted as a religion, while belief in God is stipulated as a necessary criterion for the classification. Or, more generally, one criterion might be a minimum number of members, and if this number is large (the threshold was raised in 2017 from 20,000 to 50,000 in Slovakia) [International 2018], new religions are unlikely to reach the target. Another requirement might be the existence of the religion in the country concerned for a specific number of years (in Lithuania, religious groups and associations may apply for state recognition only if they have been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years) [International 2018], again militating against eligibility of new religions for registration – or any kind of legal status at all, as is the case in some countries.

Social and Cultural Reactions. Even if the law itself does not discriminate, its application can be partial. There have been frequent reports in the US and elsewhere of the police turning a blind eye when converts to a «cult» have been illegally kidnapped and held against their will by «deprogrammers» [Patrick 1976], telling those who have appealed for help that the police do not interfere in family matters [Barker 1989: 101-110, 157-164]. Similar responses have been given when members of new religions have appealed to the courts for help.

Sometimes the law can be interpreted in a way that assumes that the customs of the majority religion(s) are those with which any «normal» citizen should be expected to comply. An example of the taken-for-granted cultural implications of a country's traditional religion was provided in an English court when it was argued that there were limits to the extent that the British could «reasonably» be expected to accommodate Jewish citizens. In this case of the late 1970s, a Mr and Mrs Ostreicher lodged an objection when the Secretary of State for the Environment decided to hold a public inquiry on a matter that concerned them (the compulsory purchase of houses they owned) on the seventh day of Passover. One of England's most senior judges, Lord Denning, ruled that «the men at the department acted perfectly reasonably» when they had arranged the inquiry to take place on 21 April, which carefully avoided Good Friday and Easter Monday, and which, he said, would seem to all ordinary people to be a quite suitable date. Another example occurred when the judge in a case involving the Unification Church and a tabloid newspaper addressed the jury with the words:

You ask yourselves whether a reasonable man could believe that Mr. Moon is in fact the

Messiah and the Lord of the Second Advent. Is he a dupe? Was he a dupe originally and then became converted? Or is he a fraud? [Barker 1984: 121-134].

Perhaps it is surprising that intransigent discrimination has come from some ecumenical and interfaith organisations which have an explicit policy that there should be freedom of religion for all in a pluralistic democracy, and that all should be treated equally. Yet these same organizations have appeared to believe that dialogue needs or ought to be limited to the more traditional or «acceptable» religions. When questioned about their refusal to admit new religions to their number, organisers have responded that their members would not like this and the whole organisation would collapse. Interestingly, it is often the members of a particular «mainstream» religion who most strongly object to NRMs claiming a place within their tradition. Thus, Soka Gakkai may be rejected by some other Buddhists, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) by some other Hindus, the Ahmadiyya by other Muslims and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), The Family International (the erstwhile Children of God) and the Unification Church by other Christians. It is possible that a new movement's claim to be Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic or Christian is seen as a threat to the boundaries of what is considered by mainstream traditions to be, respectively, 'real' Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Christianity in a way that NRMs from other traditions would not be so seen [Barker 1994].

Even in countries that make no official distinctions between different religions (apart from having an Established Church), formal recognition of NRMs is considered inappropriate in certain circumstances. In the UK, for example, NRMs may be informally

excluded. At a recent meeting at which a former British Prime Minister (Tony Blair) and the then Archbishop of Canterbury (Rowan Williams) were discussing democracy, religious freedom and the role of religion in public life [Westminster Faith]. I asked whether there were limits to the religions with which the state or the Established Church should dialogue. Both gave the same answer: talking to some individual members of some NRMs might be possible on occasion, but it would be unwise for either Church or state to engage in formal dialogue with such people.

We can also come across apparently well-meaning clergy finding ingenious ways of confirming that NRMs are «less equal than us». Once, while walking across a university campus with the Anglican chaplain, I remarked on a saffron-robed student and asked whether they had many devotees. The chaplain told me that he could not recognise the Hare Krishna movement as a religion because (despite the fact that it would fit all the criteria he would normally use in defining a «religion») there were «not enough rooms» in the chaplaincy to accommodate the addition. This, he explained, was because the university had a rule that every religion should be allotted a room in the chaplaincy. When I asked whether it might not be more honest to change the rule, he replied in a shocked tone that to do so could be seen as religious discrimination by allowing some religions, but not others, to have rooms.

Since the 1970s, new religions have frequently found themselves under attack from the contemporary «anti-cult movement» (ACM) that has spread throughout both the West and the East. This consists of groups (which may be funded by governments, traditional religions or private means) that have the primary objective of warning the public of the dangers of «destructive cults» and often

lobbying for these to be controlled or even banned altogether [Barker 2002; Shupe 1994]. The information that the anti-cult movement disseminates has tended to be generalising, often ill-informed and nearly always highly selective, pointing to occasional atrocities and suggesting that these apply to all «cults» [Shupe 1980]. Not surprisingly, it is the ACM that supplies many of the horror stories picked up by the media, and it is the media that are the most efficient disseminators of popular images of NRMs. Analyses of reports in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television indicate that the media rarely present balanced accounts of NRMs, preferring instead to attract the interest of their audiences with the more lurid, bizarre or sensational reports, thereby confirming the «conventional wisdom» that NRMs in general do not deserve the respect that can be afforded older, more established religions [Richardson 2007: 91-114; Beckford 1999: 103-19]. Such an atmosphere can have many repercussions that cannot be pursued in this paper. It might, however, be mentioned that children brought up in NRMs will frequently hide their religion from their peers, and former members will massage their curricula vitae, afraid that acknowledging a connection with a so-called «cult» would affect their life chances [Eck 2015; Barker 1989].

Finally, the cultural relativism of attitudes towards minority religions should be noted. Reactions to the diversity engendered by minority religions varies considerably between (and within) different societies, so that a particular religion may be tolerated or even welcomed in one society yet have its freedoms severely curtailed in another. In South Korea, until 2018, Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned for being conscientious objectors and thereby given criminal records denying

them the possibility of taking on certain careers, such as the law. They have also been 'liquidated' in Russia on the grounds that they are «extremist» and a danger to society. Members of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy have referred to Roman Catholicism as a cult; members of the Baha'i faith are persecuted in Iran, but regarded as one of the nine «respectable» religions in the UK; members of the Ahmadiyya community are persecuted in Pakistan, but include a government minister in the UK; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints features on the French and Belgian Reports' lists of «sectes» [Guyard 1995], and were refused membership of the Inter Faith Network UK until 2014 [Eck 2020], yet in the USA there are a couple of dozen Mormons serving as Senators or Congressmen and one (Mitt Romney) has stood as the Republican candidate for the Presidency.

Conclusion. This paper has described some of the many different ways in which increasing diversity, insofar as it encompasses the arrival of new religious movements, has sometimes led to attempts to restrict the very diversity that pluralist ideologies and policies overtly welcome. This can happen at the most formal and explicit state levels; it can be seen in the interpretation and selective implementation of the law, in traditional religions, in organisations founded with the explicit purpose of introducing controls over the activities of «cults» – and even in organisations explicitly founded with the objective of celebrating religious pluralism. Discrimination is also observable in the general culture of societies, frequently expressed through the mass media and, more recently, the ever-more pervasive social media. In short, the pluralism to be found in contemporary democracies may explicitly

celebrate freedom for all but, at a more implicit level, it would seem that the standpoint is more one of «freedom for me and, perhaps, you – but surely not them?»

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